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Robert Lee Emigh III

University of Colorado at Boulder, robert.lee.emigh@gmail.com

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THE LONG ROAD HOME

by

ROBERT LEE EMIGH III

A.A., Mott Community College, 2005

B.A., Central Michigan University, 2008

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This thesis entitled:
The Long Road Home
written by Robert Lee Emigh III
has been approved for the Department of English.

Elisabeth Sheffield

Stephen Graham Jones

Adam Bradley

Date_____

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Emigh III, Robert Lee (M.F.A., Creative Writing, Department of English)

The Long Road Home

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Elisabeth Sheffield

Carriage Town is a polluted overlarge city to which the outside world is foreign. Michael, knowing only the city, leaves home at eight years old and can't find his way back. What follows is a lifetime of living on the streets, where he falls in with two other transients and is swept up in their desires, all the while looking for his mother and trying to find his way home. Joanna is a woman with no desire for a past, who falls in with an abusive lover, with two thoughts that overshadow all else: that she must have a child, and that she must make it to Carriage Town.

For my mother, who has always done what was necessary.

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THE LONG ROAD HOME

“‘Your devotion to the past,’ observed the doctor, looking at the cab metre with apprehension, ‘is perhaps like a child’s drawing.’” – Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

“*Mother*, who was my mother? Mother, the one who screams when you suffer—but who? This was stupid, you always knew your mother’s name. Who was it that screamed? Mother? But the scream came from the machine. A machine my mother? . . . Clearly, I was out of my head.” – Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

CHAPTER I

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

It's always dark in Carriage Town. The smog. The smoke. Tendrils of electric light reaching across the streets. The shadows strong at night, hazy at midday, but always there, the shadows. And always billowing in the sky.

But everyone still has their own shadows. Electricity makes certain of that. And Michael was watching his on his eighth birthday, looking to see if it had grown any bigger. He edged over the ragged plateau of concrete and watched his shadow elongate across the rubble on the other side. The sidewalks in this part of the city were no longer sidewalks—they were rubble, and looked like the aftermath of an airstrike, jagged and uneven plates of concrete jutting in all directions. Michael's mother had told him that people had broken their ankles trying to walk the sidewalks. She told him to be careful. She told him not to leave the house without her. It wasn't an opportunity she willingly allowed.

She was in the factory. She was at work.

He looked at his shadow, stretched taut. It was thinner than he would have liked. But still—the length of his shadow pleased him. He would be that tall someday, he was certain.

He eased himself down gently, continued on his way.

It's true that the sidewalks were difficult to traverse, but they were the only option—the streets were worse, cratered with broken water pipes jutting into the open air. The fringes of the city were perennially neglected. This was not far from home; Michael was not yet far from home.

But this became less of a problem as he traveled closer to the edge of the city. The buildings became shorter, more squat, and abandoned. He could see barrel fires signaling from behind some of the buildings, the orange glow on the ground distinct from the streetlamps. It was nice to see fire, a natural light. He didn't see anyone, though. They were near the fire. Michael was cold. It was always cold in Carriage Town, the only question being of degree. Michael could see his breath blooming before his eyes. It was cold, then, that day. He was sweating from the effort of climbing over the sidewalk. He kept moving, and eventually the road transitioned from asphalt to dirt, and that's when he knew he was close, though he had never seen a dirt road before, had never seen so much dirt in one place in his life. Grime, he understood, but dirt—soil—was a foreign element. Still, he didn't pause to reflect or ponder until the sidewalk ended, which is where he had been told to go.

That was when he didn't know what to do.

His mother had told him once about a forest around the city, had promised she'd show him one day. He was incredulous: *plants from the ground? No!* This was not something he could imagine. There were trees near Carriage Town's hub, trees whose trunk sunk beneath grates in the sidewalk, the streetlights hanging over them warmer and brighter than anywhere else in the city. But his mother, explaining it, had crouched, perched on the edge of their front door and filled one of her mangled hands with gravel and let it all drop out slowly like hailstones. "Out of the ground," she had said. He told her he didn't believe it, and she had looked hurt.

He coughed a cough that was as small as he felt. And he was small. Short and with a mop of grease-colored hair. He squinted because the streetlamp at the end of the sidewalk—the last streetlamp—was too bright for his liking. Past it, in the last remains of the light, the shadows of a train track and a train platform (Michael wondered if it was the same track that passed his

house—there were many tracks in Carriage Town), a small house with small lights that cast shadows of their own, and beyond that, darkness, of the kind Michael had never seen: absolute.

He had never been so far from home.

On the train home from school the day before, a blind boy said to visit him at the end of the sidewalk. The train was old and made noises like a tin can full of coins, and shook from side to side, but Michael had heard him well enough. The boy had said it loudly, but Michael was the only one who seemed to take notice. He sat next to the boy and asked him why he should visit, and why he was invited.

“Because,” said the boy, who wore dark glasses and held a telescopic stick with a wristband dangling off the top, “my father works with your mother, and he told me that she was a nice woman, and that such nice women must have nice sons and I’m lonely, and I don’t have any friends, and I knew you would take this train because it goes by your house.” He took a breath. His hair was the color of a rotting orange and slicked back, and he had the beginnings of a carrot-colored mustache. He was thin and his feet reached the floor of the train while he was sitting; Michael was not thin and his feet did not reach the floor.

When he held out his hand he almost hit Michael in the jaw.

Michael felt something strange when he took the older boy’s hand. He did not know how to do a proper handshake, and so simply grabbed the hand and released it as quickly, but against the boy’s skin he felt a kind of tumbling, a kind of falling, and a vague jolt that was not simply a matter of the train wobbling more than it should have, which it did. It made him think of his mother. But Michael paid little attention to this, instead asking, “If you’re so blind, how’d you know I am?”

“My father told me that your mother smells like ginger, and you smell like ginger. I haven’t smelled anyone else who smells like ginger.”

“Oh,” he said. Michael didn’t know what ginger was, and so conceded that the older boy must be right. “Okay.”

“You’re Lars,” he said. “Right?” He asked the question having already made up his mind.

Lars didn’t lean forward, but he *seemed* to lean, somehow. “So you’re coming? Your stop is next. You could just stay on the train and come to my place. It’s at the end of the sidewalk.” He smiled; his teeth were perfect. Michael thought that this boy might be bigger than he looked, somehow. Like he could be hiding a bigger body inside of him.

Michael said, “Maybe,” but then got off at his stop, hoping the blind boy wouldn’t notice, but heard, just as the door was closing behind him, his feet hitting the concrete platform, the older boy.

“See you tomorrow, then?”

And Michael went home, which was within sight of the train tracks, and he went to bed early and unsettled, before his mother was even home from work.

But here he was, at the end of the sidewalk. He wondered if he had gone the right way. Maybe the sidewalk ended elsewhere, too. He doubted that: he didn’t think it possible.

He scratched his head, stepped onto the dirt. The air felt thicker here. Viscous. He crossed the muddy yard toward the house with the faintly lit windows. There was no grass in the city, though the ground was covered in seeds. Michael did not know what they were. They looked like thousands of dead insects in the half-light. The air was warm.

He knocked on the door.

And the blind boy opened it immediately, as if he had been waiting for just this. He smiled hugely. Those perfect teeth. Michael wondered if he'd be able to see his reflection in them with enough light.

"I didn't think you'd come," he said, and then, a whisper, as if to someone behind him, he repeated himself. Michael was going to ask him why, but the boy pushed him a few paces back and slammed the door behind him. It sounded like the hood of a car being slammed shut.

"Follow me," said Lars, with a flourish of the hand. He smiled, and he walked quickly, carrying his unextended stick with him, and he headed for the train platform that was dimly lit in the always-dying light past the end of the sidewalk.

Michael had to hurry to catch up, breathing fast. He asked, walking a little behind the blind boy, "How do you know where you're going?"

"Because this is my home." Then added, "How would I know anything else?"

Michael tripped on the steps up the train platform, and by the time he pulled himself back up to his feet, dizzy with bloody scuffs on his right temple and his shin, Lars was sitting at the edge of the platform, his feet dangling over the edge, above the tracks. Michael sat next to him. The edge of his vision was red. He wiped his hand across the side of his face and pulled it down in front of him, holding it at the wrist. It was dripping; there was a lot of blood.

"You could have helped me up," he said.

"How would I have found you?" said Lars.

A whimper: "This is your home." Michael missed his mother, very suddenly.

"You're not part of my home," he said. An afterthought: "But I heard you."

Michael would have liked to ask him what he meant by that, but his mother had taught him not to ask too many questions, had taught him instead to observe. And he was confused. He

hadn't noticed, for instance, that from the side, behind Lars's glasses, there was a green iris insinuating itself in his direction despite the older boy's cataracts, or that the boy's face was too smooth to have ever held the orange mustache of the day before. He hadn't noticed that there was only one set of train tracks here, whereas there were always two or more at a time every else. He hadn't noticed that, behind him, the boy's house had gone. It was too dark to notice these things immediately. He noticed these things now, as he ran a hand across his face again and smeared a bloody handprint across his jeans—it looked like someone had tried to climb him. And he was about to mention them all, for they had congealed into an idea, when the older boy spoke.

“Happy birthday,” he said, and smiled. They were looking out into the dark, at their shadows stretching hazily from themselves and into nothing. The most complete nothing Michael had ever seen.

Michael said, “There are no lights here.”

“This is the end of the city.”

Michael shifted his weight, kicked his legs. “I don't believe you.” He sniffed. “My mom never told me about it.”

“And why would she know? How would she know? People who live here have always lived here.”

“She knows more than I do.”

“And I,” said Lars, grinning darkly, “know more than her. We are past the end of the sidewalk, boy, and we are now at the end of the track”—here he jumped down onto the tracks, stood in the center, gestured to both sides—“where it curves back into itself, back into the city.

This is the end, so to speak, of the möbius strip that holds this city together. Do you know what a möbius strip is?”

“You’re not that much older than me,” Michael leaning forward, irritated.

“It means this place is stuck together. That you can go that way,” gesturing left, “down these tracks, and you can end up back here from the other side.” His voice was velvety, and Michael liked the sound of it, even through his irritation.

“I’m not a boy,” said Michael, pushing himself down to the tracks, “Today’s my birthday.”

When his feet touched the railroad ties was when he felt the desolation of the place. Hazy half-dark, an old concrete platform with the corners crumbled away, cracks all over. Silent save for the moments when one of the two boys spoke. Not even a train. Michael wondered: how long had he ever gone without hearing a train? An engine? Without hearing the people who use the trains and engines. He was uncomfortable. He was sorry he came. He wanted to be home.

“Then what are you? Why did you come when I called?” Lars was looking down. And in, it seemed. He was hard for Michael to read, and Michael thought himself good at understanding people. That’s what his mother had told him.

They were standing toe-to-toe, between the iron tracks, feet on the wood and gravel between. Michael was fully two heads shorter than the older boy, though he wasn’t frightened and he wanted to hurt Lars, suddenly, a desire he felt in his bones. Michael wiped his forehead again—the blood kept dripping in front of his eye. There was the dark behind Lars, and something Michael had never quite seen before, or the shadows of something he hadn’t seen before. The shadows were in a darkness deeper than just the absence of light.

“There are trees out there,” Lars said, glancing over his shoulder.

Defensively, “I’ve seen trees.” When he blinked he felt his blood working it’s way along the corner of his eye again and down his cheek. It wasn’t in his mouth yet.

“I mean *wild* trees, the kind that’re mushed up against one another and with branches broken by each other and with leaves that hang all the way down to the ground. The ones in the city have *space*. They’re *planted*. They’re not *real*, boy, don’t you understand? There are so many of them that you can’t tell where one ends and another begins. It’s all roots and branches and leaves.”

Michael didn’t believe, but he had to admit that there was an awful lot of *something* in beyond the tracks. Mysterious tangles and limbs moving gently in a breeze he couldn’t quite feel. It looked like a lot of tightly coiled muscles, all organic and terrifying. Michael resolved not to go past this train track, and never to try.

He wiped a hand across his temple again. He was still bleeding, albeit less. He looked down at his hand for a moment and he pushed the older boy, who stumbled over the tie and toward the dark. Michael felt a silent rumble beneath his feet that grew when Lars stepped back onto the track and started to walk away, bloody handprint over his kidney.

“Follow me. I want to show you something. And then I’ll take you home.” Lars’s legs were long, and he was moving fast.

Michael ran at him. He was angry. So he ran as fast as he could, and with each footfall he could feel a greater rumbling beneath him, and he could smell the smell of oil and he could hear the sounds of an engine, and just as he slammed into Lars there was a light in his face—he couldn’t see, and he could hear nothing else over the sound of a shrill electric whistle, and then the light went multicolored and blotchy as an elbow struck his temple, and his face was wetter

than it had been a minute earlier, stickier, and he didn't feel the rumble again until he was on his back in the gravel.

He opened his eyes to see the train collide with Lars, whose face he couldn't see, and he shut his eyes as quickly as he could. It was like the train was trying to push him away, all noise and wind and blood. The rumbling went on and on, and, instead of fading away, simply stopped. The dead quiet, the engine gone. He opened his eyes in the half-dark, the always-dark, and could see the station when he turned his head to the side, as hazy and cracked and old as ever. He stood up and wiped his hand across his head again. He was bleeding too much. He could feel it gushing. It stung his eyes and covered his cheek. It ran down his fingers and his wrist and his arm. There was a long spatter of blood along the tracks, like it was sprayed from a hose. He was dizzy.

He went toward the light, where he knew the sidewalk would be waiting. He could follow the train tracks. But still—he had a long walk back home.

#

Joanna was twenty, and she was in love. The grass scratching up to her knees, the sun set to scorch, the dry rustle when the wind rolled through, and the industrial behemoth of the manufactured city, Carriage Town, visible far in the distance, walled and monolithic, larger plumes rising from the smokestacks each week, new smokestacks being erected each week, the factory growing even faster, somehow, than the city itself. It had almost appeared overnight, miles and miles away from her fiancé's attempt at a farm. The smokestacks stuck up from the middle—they looked like so many matchstick-fingers reaching up to the sky

It looked like a big iron pot blocking part of the horizon, delaying the sunrise.

Her fiancé had whisked her from the wandering life—no, it was not so passive on her part. The rural country had been boring to her, and her fiancé was the most exciting thing she had seen. This is an old story, and a trite one, and she would recognize it as such when she grew older, but she nevertheless found comfort in it. She met him the week before she ran away with him; and now, a month after she ran away with him, Carriage Town was visible in the distance. She wondered if she had just failed to notice it or if it really was built that quickly.

He had brought her there, in any case, because he had found her wandering the fields at night. Her memories began and ended with her fiancé. This did not bother her. She had carried a knife with her at all times, until her fiancé took her in.

She was not made to work, and she did not want to work the land. So she wandered the fields around their ramshackle home—with its roof caving in, its walls of corrugated iron shivering with the breeze, the house imploding—she would wade through the grasses, try to find a clearing from which to watch the smoke from Carriage Town, to look for a pattern in the pollution. There was little else to do.

On that day, she followed this routine, went to the clearing by the road, next to the junked car her fiancé was ostensibly fixing. It was small and white, ulcers of rust polka-dotting the surface. There was one seat on the inside and the rest was exposed wiring and steel; the tires were flat and the rims of the wheels were eating into the soil, little bits of weeds growing up and around. He had promised her that the house and the farm were temporary stops on their way to the city; he told her that Carriage Town was much farther away than it looked. They would need a car to get there, he said; that was the car that would get them there, he said.

(The thing about hindsight is that it is a fiction, as pure a fiction as can be—creating a perspective that, whether possible or impossible to have had at the time, simply didn't exist. An idealization.)

So she leaned against the car on that day, sat on the ground and felt the rough rust try to eat into her through her shirt. He had said they would be there for at least a year, to see the crop through—but still, it was him, him she hadn't met before, he who had promised to take care of her, and that was all she wanted: a break from taking care of herself, or from only taking care of herself. He was the first face she remembered, so he had to take care of her.

But she needed something to do. The smoke in the distance rolled lazily through the sky, the bland, bleach-white clouds working their way toward the over-boiled pot of Carriage Town; they didn't roll and roil like the smoke; she didn't see patterns like she saw in the smoke.

The smoke looked like it was collapsing into itself over and over, marching unerringly upward.

She had not yet given herself to her fiancé.

The smoke's arc was wide; it looked like the pictures of mushroom clouds her fiancé had shown her on television once, a stalk of smoke letting go of itself as it ascended.

She had named him her fiancé because she didn't know what else to name him. Men either paid her for sex or beat her and maybe raped her afterward. She did not have the vocabulary to deal with someone who didn't do these things, not even on the level of a name.

It looked like a mystical, world-consuming tree, the smoke.

His name, his real name, was Lars. She didn't understand his intentions at first.

The white clouds at the periphery looked so strange to her, next to the smoke, like they were left out somehow, or dismissed, or mutilated. She realized that this thought was, in some essential way, backwards.

She was naïve to think of him as some kind of cosmic charity, as someone or something essentially universal. But still, when he offered to take her in, to take care of her, she couldn't say no. He was there at the beginning. He was the beginning. She couldn't start anywhere else.

And he came to her then, in that thought and outside of it, in the flesh, like he was an essential part of her dreams and her dreams were an essential part of the world around her, like the smoke in the sky or the ground at her feet. The grass parted around his knees and he came to her and, after standing over her for a few breaths, sat down next to her. She heard some of the rust scrape against his shirt, dirty copper-white, and she pictured it turning to dust and joining the soil, copper-colored flecks in the darkness.

And they were silent for a long time, Joanna looking up at the smoke and the clouds, her fiancé looking at the soil between them, picking some up, sifting it through his fingers. She felt like she was waiting for him to speak.

The wind blew hard and sudden, then stopped. Then he leaned over bit her shoulder, digging through fabric and flesh. She yelped. She clenched. She held as still as she could. And she could feel the blood well up around his teeth, and then he pulled away, flecks of blood around his lips, and that was when she screamed, and reached for the knife that wasn't there. And he was on her, as she screamed, on her and rucking up her dress and she was digging her fingernails into his arms, pressing as hard as she could until she felt the pop of his skin breaking, and as she tried to pull her fingers together to open the flesh further, he was inside of her, and she ripped a nail off in his forearm—she heard the crack of it much more vividly than she felt the

pain. The broken nail took precedence, as she snatched her hands out of his flesh, blood-cloaked, and looked at the sickly-jagged edge of what was left of the nail, jagged bits sticking out from just under the quick, and that was all she saw anymore, as he was in her and in her and in her, and digging his own nails into her abdomen. She wasn't resisting any longer, too enamored with the piece of herself she had broken herself, too enamored with the wound in front of her face, and it was when he finished and he left without a word, grass rustling, parting around him, that she began to weep.

If only he hadn't bit her, it wouldn't have been a problem.

The fingernail. She could have lost more.

That was the first time she had sex with her fiancé. As she lay in the dirt, covered in her blood and his, watching the puffy white clouds pass overheads, the darkness of the smoke of Carriage Town on her periphery, she realized that she was surprised that this hadn't happened sooner. And maybe that meant that this man really could offer her something, really could take care of her. She was relieved that she now had a context in which she could understand this man. Lars. He was human enough.

But her fingernail. Her fingernail was a problem. Was it still in his arm? She felt as though she needed to find it, find the piece of herself that had broken off. It was something tangible that had left her.

The sun was so, so bright.

When she stood she was steady on her feet. There was no clutching at the nearest object, no leaning against the rust-pocked car. No. There was no need. For any of it. She stretched.

Her questions were: did he get her pregnant? She hoped so. Would she keep the baby? Who knew? But there was a sense of looming responsibility that day, as the clouds and the

smoke collided, as she sucked on her finger and ran her tongue against the jagged edge peeking out from under the cuticle. Her tongue started to bleed. She didn't care that her tongue started to bleed. No, a cut in her mouth, a mouthful of blood, was not something she would worry about that day; that day, she would worry about only what could be, but what wasn't yet. A baby. A baby. She suddenly wanted one, wildly and irrationally, as if Lars were the lock and a baby was the key and she was the one who would open that lock.

This, of course, is an old story.

But Joanna wasn't worried about old stories. Joanna never was and never would be worried about a story's age. She was smart enough to know intuitively that age does not equal merit. And so she placed her faith in the idea of a life that may or may not have been conceived that day, put all of herself into that idea even as the sunlight grew so intense at high noon so as to sting her eyes, as she refused to squint or look to the ground, as the knee-high grass scratched her legs and tipped their way under her dress one-by-one, like little child-fingers grasping at the hem of her garments, as she wiped the blood from her face as best she could and as the best she could do was smear it around so it looked like war paint, a secret motivational code on her cheeks; and she stumbled, finally, back to the house, at last losing the slightest confidence in her footing as she approached the door and turned back and waved at the silhouette of her fiancé in the distance, who appeared to wave back, and she crossed the threshold.

This was everything she wanted, that day.

#

Carriage Town, as one of the great misnomers, is a city of millions. It's a giant circle, like a target, and at the center, the bulls-eye, is the factory—the only one, the one that keeps the city self-sufficient. Where Michael's mother works, where she takes the train everyday, and from

whence she returns every evening. A huge facility that only pokes a hundred feet into the air, but covers miles of city-space and goes deep underground. Workers could, and often did, get lost when they wandered. Most of them eventually found their way back with the help of other workers; some of them died, either because they wandered underground until they slowly deteriorated, or because they ended up someplace they shouldn't have and, as a result, were killed by whatever there was to kill them—which was a lot, but was often their co-workers, and with the blessings of higher management. Those who returned unharmed, or harmed but still alive, were, more often than not, fired. Which, given the city's dearth of other gainful employment, was another problem.

All the city's trains and train tracks led, in sometimes circuitous fashion, to the factory, and from the factory to the city's fringes, and back again. Because people all over the city worked there. The tracks were like a tangled Möbius strip, or a knotted series of them, and the only way to take a train out of the city involved getting to the city's edge, leaving, and finding transportation outside of its borders, since Carriage Town was very much a place unto itself that had long forgotten the outside world.

Which hadn't been the intention, that isolation, not at first. But the idea of a thing often can't help but become all-consuming.

#

Michael didn't count the days. He had lost all concept of time. Whenever he achieved something he thought of as a milestone, he considered it a birthday.

On Michael's ninth birthday, he had finally become accustomed to fishing food out of other people's garbage. He begged for much of the time prior, and ran from anyone who struck him as formal, or anyone wearing anything like a uniform. His mother had told him that police

would try and take him from her, and it followed that, now separate, they would try and keep him from finding her again. He spent his days looking for home—riding the trains, walking the tracks, begging for food from anyone who didn't look like they might take him away. Looking for Lars, sometimes, though he didn't expect to find him again. He was forced to turn to a dumpster when nobody was charitable. He cut his hand badly on some broken glass and the edge of an opened tin can. His hand was sticky with blood and whatever had been in the can, smelled like rotten fruit and filled the air with a sweetness that would have made him gag a year before. But he had found some scraps, and, spoiled and filthy as they were, he felt better after eating, and so he stopped begging from strangers, started building up the nerve to break into a grocery store.

On his thirteenth birthday, voice squeaky and hormones welling up in him like an overfull water balloon, he forcibly removed his virginity. He was a big thirteen year old, looked like an adult save for the hint of child still in his face, a roundness and a softness in his deep blue eyes, and he pulled a teenage girl into an alleyway somewhere near the edge of the city, held a knife to her throat and told her to undress and be quiet, and it was very quickly then that she was on her back and he was on her, and in her, on the alley floor, his knees scraping against pebbles and concrete. She smelled bad, and it was a poor area, but he didn't care. He was sure he smelled worse, but even so, smelling her up close made him want her more, which made him miserable in a place deeper than he knew he had, a heaving-from-the-stomach sadness, because it was all over before he had a chance to do it, and he stood and did up his pants and ran. Had he stayed to watch her get up and leave, he would have seen that there were bits of glass and stones against her back the whole time. The girl left the alley naked and bleeding. He never thought of her again.

By the time his sixteenth birthday came around, he had made some friends. There were plenty of homeless teenagers in Carriage Town. The difference, for them, they decided, was that they wouldn't beg for help or for food or for anything, they wouldn't go to any of the city's homeless shelters, and when someone dropped money in front of them while they were dozing on the sidewalk, they would throw it back at their face—an activity they took a special amount of joy in when the money was coins. They would make bets with each other on how the person would react. Sometimes they ended up beating the person and leaving them on the street. Sometimes they ran from the police, sometimes after throwing money at them.

There were two. He met them one night when they were burglarizing a grocery store in the middle of the night. It was toward the edge of the city, ever impoverished, and so this was expected, and Michael had been expecting it for some time, had been overly cautious and wary, though this was the first time he found other people. The lights in the front of the store were on, but the rest was dark. He saw only two silhouettes bearing down before he was on his back—and there he was above him, blond shock of hair spilling around his tattooed face, inches from Michael's. The man was holding Michael's wrists against his throat. He asked who he was, and Michael only wheezed when he tried to say his name. The man was tall and blond and slack-jawed, and poorly-drawn homemade tattoos were all over his face and peeked out from his dirty undershirt—he looked as though a small child had drawn all over him. The tattoos on his face were illegible, had resolved into faded blobs of color, like a wrestler's mask. His arms and chest were full of blocky renditions of robots fighting each other and people fucking. The hair on his face was so fair it was almost invisible, like a child who had tried to grow a beard.

Michael couldn't breathe. He didn't struggle, thought that this was maybe welcome, that he'd rather die than be homeless and motherless for the rest of his life, was his only thought at

the time. He was willing to give up. As for his readiness to give up, he couldn't say—that moment was one of resignation than anything else. Michael could tell the man was staring into his eyes in the hope of divining his intentions, and the man stood just as the splotches of color swimming in front of his eyes became indistinguishable from the man's face.

Michael rolled to his side and coughed. He cried. He kicked his feet. He thrashed and let out whatever noise he could from his throat, and he didn't stop until he fleetingly—through a lapse in his clenched-shut eyelids—saw a second figure standing over him.

He held completely still. He sat up. He opened his eyes, looked at his hands. There were finger-shaped dark splotches on his wrists, the flesh tender. His wrists looked like the man's face.

"Your name," said the man. The other figure was a woman, short, with hair in matted knots that pressed against her shoulders—she looked like she hadn't suffered in her entire life. She was almost smiling, looked like she was always almost smiling.

"Your name," said the man. "My name's Jack." Gesturing, "This one's Liss. Now you."

"Michael." He couldn't tell which splotches of color were from the lack of oxygen and which were actually tattooed on Jack's face.

"She saved you, Michael." He had an arm wrapped around Liss's shoulder, hand gripping the other side of her neck, thumb on the back, fingers curled lightly around front. "You should know that. She told me to stop." A squeeze, quick enough that Michael almost missed it, the fingernails digging, however briefly, into her neck. And just as quickly he uncurled his fingertips, kept his hands in place. She was not fazed. "I would think she was sick of me if it was anyone else, but no. Not her. We were made for each other, is one thing you should understand—that you need to understand—if you're going to be coming with us." He paused,

smiled, a set of teeth brighter than they should have been, drawing attention away from the crude drawing that was his face. “You’re going to be coming with us,” he said, “so get up.”

He stood when he was told. And when Jack told him to grab as many boxes of cereal as he could carry, he and Liss and Jack all did so. They left through the back door, where Jack and Liss had come in, walked as fast as they could without dropping anything.

Jack moved fastest, a specter shifting through the haze. They kept their eyes on what they could see of him, and when he vanished, Liss said that she knew where Jack was going, and so Michael followed her instead. This was at the edge of the city; they had to measure their steps gingerly lest they fall, the jagged concrete always a threat.

They walked for a long time, measuring their steps carefully, tottering at times. They were silent, the only exchange between them being the courtesy to stop and stare when one of them looked as though they might fall. They never fell. And that courtesy was no longer a necessity as the sidewalks started to smooth out, as the lamplight grew stronger and less jaundiced, as there was enough light for Michael to search for wrinkles and contours in Liss’s face. He couldn’t find any, or wouldn’t let himself find any.

They ended up at a bench near the city center. Michael wanted to ask why they didn’t take the train—even he knew the trains were free—but he was afraid, and so he said nothing. Jack was sitting, watching the cars go by, arm intermittently going fore-arm deep into a box of cereal. There was a pile of other boxes under the bench, and he gestured for the two of them to place theirs underneath as well. It was a small commotion when they just dropped them and shifted them under with their feet, Liss first, then, tentatively, Michael.

Liss sat down next to Jack, crushed a box of cereal underfoot as she set her head on his shoulder. Jack stared at Michael until he sat on her other side.

They sat in silence for a time, watching the trains pass by on the other side of the street, a steady heartbeat.

Jack and Liss were lovers, they continually pointed out. They wanted to make sure Michael knew that. They were going to own a big house near the city center someday, but not too close to the factory, they told him. They were going to have children.

Michael learned very quickly that Jack and Liss spent a great deal of time hoping for things. Michael would never asked how they were going to fulfill those hopes. He knew better, intuitively. Michael did follow them, and the same routine played out whenever they ran out of cereal, in a different part of the city.

Jack and Liss spent their days kissing and fucking in whatever secluded places they could find, and the rest of the time they weren't running or throwing money at kind strangers or stealing food, they tried to get Michael to join in on the kissing and fucking. Jack was open to it, but Liss pushed, reminded Michael continuously that she was infertile. She said she didn't want him to worry about anything, that everything would be fine now that the three of them were together.

Whenever he declined, Liss only shrugged.

Much later, the three of them were out in the open, near the city's center. They were on a bench, wearing the same clothes they had been wearing when they met; there were fraying in unexpected places and full of unexpected holes. They would have to steal new clothes soon. They stank and people stared. It was hot and the yellow streetlamp above them buzzed quietly in the half-dark.

Liss's father used to beat her, she said.

“I think that's why,” she said. “Why I’m infertile. But it kind of works out now, because I don't have to worry about it. It’s nice to not have to worry about things.” She looked the part. She touched Michael’s shoulder.

They were going to adopt when they had their nice house in their nice neighborhood, she said.

Liss ran away because of her father. When she had her first period she was afraid she was bleeding from the inside because her father had beat her so badly the night before. “I thought I would die,” she said. She smiled, “But hey, he never raped me,” as if she felt he should have when he had the chance. The corners of her eyes curved upward; the thought made her happy.

It was the only period she had ever had, she said. It took her several more years to build up the resolve to leave, she said.

They were scrunched together on the bench, Michael and Jack on either side, Liss's head in Jack's lap, her feet on Michael's.

Jack said, “I just couldn't take my parents anymore. They meddled.” When Michael asked what he meant, Jack smiled and looked up at the streetlamp. Jack's voice was slow, like he was in awe of anything that could ever happen. His blond hair was tied back with an old silver necklace he claimed to have stolen from his mother the day he left. He met Liss within hours of leaving home. Michael asked him if he had ever been alone.

Jack paused, smiled, said, “No.” He was amazed. “I don't think I could do that. But then, It’s not something I’ve had to worry about.”

Jack and Liss kissed.

They asked Michael why he ran away.

Michael asked them why they waited until now to ask, when they had met a year before.

“It's been that long?” Liss.

Michael nodded.

And they both looked at him expectantly, and Liss kicked her feet lightly against his chest, prodding, and Michael cut her off when she began to speak.

“I got lost,” he said, “on my birthday.” His voice cracked, but not due to sadness.

He knew he'd have been in trouble if he had ever made it home. And his mother would have worried. He couldn't deal with his mother's worrying anymore, is what happened.

He didn't tell them about Lars, nor about the train that hit him, or that last, parting elbow to the head. He didn't tell them that his mother refused to overlook even the slightest scrape or mark on his body, always pacing when she found one, wringing her hands, wondering aloud in a voice fast and frantic whether it warranted a trip to the doctor. He didn't tell them that his mother would have taken him to the hospital had he grown old enough with her for her to hear his voice change. He didn't tell them his mother insisted that he stay home always while she was at work, to the point where she locked his bedroom door from the outside, or that he broke his bedroom window to get outside that day. And, having not told them any of this, he also didn't tell them that there was no doubt in his mind that his mother did what she did out of a place of pure, unmitigated love, and that her ultimate vindication was that she turned out to be correct in being so worried.

He didn't tell them that he wanted it all back.

Jack asked, in his slow-amazed voice, “Why didn't you just find some train tracks and follow them?”

“Because I was afraid of the train tracks.”

Which made Liss laugh before she asked him when his birthday actually was.

And when he told her it was that day, that it was the anniversary, and he was sixteen as of a few hours ago, her entire body vibrated with what seemed like joy and she smiled up at him and didn't seem to be thinking of Jack for the first time since he had met her.

He didn't actually know, though. The days and the years had turned into one thing, and then into nothing.

That night, Liss had sex with him as his birthday present, despite his protests. He was terrified; she was terrifying. It was the first time he had had consensual sex. He thought it went much better than his first time.

Jack gave him a homemade tattoo, like the ones covering his own body. Michael asked for a tattoo of a little red wagon, because it would remind him of his mother. Jack stole boxes of red ink pens and black ink pens from a store that night and forced the ink from several of each into cups he had stolen, and he dipped a needle he had stolen into the appropriate ink and then into Michael, repeatedly. When it was done, the wagon's handle was crooked and there was space between the wagon and the wheels, but it made Michael smile whenever he thought of it and it made him smile more whenever he looked at it, and Liss had made him smile and he thought that maybe he would take the two of them up on their offer, maybe he'd join them in every possible capacity they'd allow. He felt boundless. It was the best birthday he had ever had.

#

Joanna would perch on the stool in the farmhouse every morning, feeling her weight against the bend of her toes atop the chair, looking as though she would jump off and seize anything there was to be seized in a given moment. She never jumped; whenever she dismounted, her movements were slow and deliberate, as though she were afraid a sudden

movement might startle something. She said it was how she was comfortable. Lars said it was how she dealt with stress.

Lars bit her shoulder every morning to wake her up, drew blood every time. She had given up on bandaging the spot, on hoping it would heal. He was very precise. The same wound remained open. And if a man would bite her so precisely, like clockwork, then why would he hesitate to do anything else to her in the same fashion?

And yet. He had raped once, and only once. She still felt the rust against her back, through her shirt, but since that day he had become sweet, and overly so, ceasing his work in the field at regular intervals to check on her and to cook for her. He was gentle with her. He asked permission to take her, always, and she never felt as though she could refuse—never, indeed, even *wanted* to refuse, so caring had he become. He didn't say much to her, didn't ask her about herself, but rather appraised her with long stares and nods and, when she was lucky, or when she wasn't perched on the stool in front of the window, a very small smile, followed by an entreaty with his hands.

Strong workman's hands, Lars's. He was tall and deceptively thick, looked wiry from a distance. He looked younger, less weathered, than his demeanor and occupation would suggest. He did not seem like he would know how to live off the land in any capacity, but telling tales of doing just that was how he had lured Joanna away from her scavengings. She was mostly okay with this, now that they had settled the business of sex, now that she could spend her days watching: Lars, the sky, the smoke, Carriage Town. She walked to the rusty old car every day to see if he had begun working on it, and every day she was disappointed. But still, she liked to watch things, enjoyed that life for a time, until she started asking questions.

She asked the first question one morning when Lars was cooking breakfast. He was frying eggs and bacon he said he had taken from their own livestock, but Joanna had never seen or heard any livestock near their property. The smell of smoking grease filled the room and the sunrise pierced through the haze and she asked him, through the fog, “Why is it called Carriage Town?”

He half-turned from the stove. “Maybe they make carriages in the factory there.” His voice was deep and rough and she willed herself to smell his ginger scent through the breakfast smells.

“I haven’t seen a carriage.”

“Maybe they don’t,” he said, “but then, you’re not in the city,” and he turned back as if to pronounce that the conversation was over, and it was.

She asked the second question outside, where he didn’t expect to encounter her. She followed him once, walking through the fields after him, at a distance he couldn’t hear, letting the grass catch in the hem of her dress and scratch her legs up to her thighs. She caught up to him as he entered a clearing. Her legs were bleeding from scores of tiny scratches, and her dress was decorated with a sprinkling of little tears beneath the waist. It stuck to the bloodiest spots on her legs, little ulcers against the fabric.

She spoke as he was bending down to pick up an old-looking scythe she had seen him swinging from the window. She asked, with less hesitance in her voice, less wavering, than she intended, “Where do you keep the animals?”

He stopped, bent down, one hand clasped around the wooden handle, before standing and turning to regard her. He held the scythe limply. His red stubble was starting to thicken and his eyes, ever difficult to read, ever cold and blue, held her for a long moment.

“You’re not on your stool,” he said. His voice was as gentle as his eyes when they had coupled the night before, all watery and kind. Different from these eyes, bullet-like.

She had never followed him out that far; their house was a benign shack marking time against the dirt road in the distance, the smallest possible precursor to the monolithic smokestacks against the horizon. The smoke seemed to be mushrooming out farther than before, as if the city were drawing closer to them. She wanted to ask him then if that was the way of large cities, but she had committed to her question, had committed to displeasing him this way, and she would hold fast.

She said, “But where do you keep the animals? That you’ve been cooking? I’m just trying to figure this place out.” Her voice wavered then, a silent pause in the back of her throat. She felt like she was trying to swallow a stone the size of her fist.

And in two steps he was within breathing distance of her, and she smelled the sour smell of his mouth layered inexplicably with ginger, the sweat already beading subtly on his face from the sun. It was hot that morning. He looked down at her, two heads higher, wider, and she felt a bead of sweat trickling down her thigh; it tickled but she felt no compulsion to laugh. She tried to make her face steely, but judging by the shifting of his own features she had failed and simply looked confused.

“Why don’t you know how the world works? Why didn’t you learn? *How* didn’t you learn?” And he was angry with her then, and she felt a ripple in the back of her throat.

He knew about her background and she told him so. “I didn’t have the benefit of anyone teaching me,” she said. Lars had in some capacity come from money, she knew, had, in her mind, been given every advantage. Whereas Joanna was a wanderer from as early as she could remember, had no parents or friends until she met Lars, and before that she had learned to fend

for herself well enough. She did not miss fending for herself. But she felt now as though he was condescending. “Look,” she said, the blond of her hair too subdued and mute to even catch the light, “Why can’t you just tell me? I know I’m not as smart as you and it takes me longer to figure things out and it frustrates you. And it would just be easier if you’d tell me this one thing, to answer questions when I ask them, because how else am I supposed to learn?”

And Lars smiled, clasped a heavy hand against each of her shoulders, and said, “You *watch*. You watch anyway, so you should be learning from that.” And he turned, lifted the scythe to his shoulder and he walked through some untreaded grass and out of her vision, his rustling still audible when she finally decided to turn around and go back to the house of corrugated iron and perch on her stool.

Their house did not have a lock. She could feel most breezes inside, and the stronger ones inched the door open, the shriek of iron waking her in the night.

So she went home and she perched on her stool and she waited till he came into view again, when the sun was low and stung her eyes. He was carrying a burlap sack at his side, stained and dripping red at the bottom; it was big and sometimes his arm wavered and he let it drag against the ground, coming up, she could see, clumped with dirt and grass pockmarked against the red.

The door opened with its customary scream, the hinge rusted and worn. His footfalls were heavy and he dumped the contents of the bag into the sink and turned on the tap. (How he had managed to get running water in a glorified lean-to, she couldn’t imagine. He wouldn’t tell her and, following his instruction to watch him and learn, she could never figure it out.)

The smell of blood wormed its way into her, a thousand little smelly maggots wiggling inside, and she wanted to vomit. She was no stranger to blood, or to dead animals, but this

smelled like old blood, blood that had been in the open air for too long, blood that had somehow fermented. She was a stranger to this kind of blood. The sink was filled with halved animals, clean cuts in their midsections, almost entirely rabbits and squirrels, the eyes open and bulging, a couple of heads peeking over the rim of the sink. Lars usually cleaned and dressed meat outside; that night, he did it over the sink, leaving tufts of fur and clumps of animal skin and bones on the kitchen counter and around his feet until he was finished, when he cleaned it all up in almost as little time as their conversation in the field had taken. And then he gave her a look as if to say, “See? It’s easy,” and then he made her dinner and then they ate and then they fucked, and he woke her with his teeth in the fragile, scabby imprints on her shoulder, and then she perched on her stool and watched him walk into the distance.

And so life continued for the next month. She watched and tried to learn but failed to figure out most of what he was doing. He wouldn’t let her follow him too far out into the fields. The pigs and the cow parts he brought home and butchered couldn’t have been theirs. She nevertheless raised no objection, asked for nothing for quite some time, remained passive and submissive and ever watchful, and he seemed to like her eyes on him, appraising and puzzling, and so life was good.

She asked the third question when he was inside of her, in the dark, before sleep: “When are you going to fix the car?” He ignored her question until he finished, and when he rolled off of her and made to fall asleep, she put a hand on his arm and asked again, softer.

And he whispered, so that she couldn’t tell if she was meant to hear or not, “As soon as you stop asking so many questions.”

And for a time, Joanna did stop asking questions. She stopped watching him, because she knew her eyes were asking, and she really did believe that he would fulfill what she had taken

that night as a promise. So she spent her days as she had spent them when he first took her to his shack; she wandered the fields in the opposite direction of where Lars headed each day, spent time around the junky old car, tried to discern some progress in the efforts the rust and plant life to take it over (concluding every day that it looked exactly as it did the first time she saw it), and looked at Carriage Town in the distance, a boiling pot of smoke on the horizon, the sunset strangely nuclear, and encroaching, she thought, ever further on the blue sky all around. She hoped the city would expand and engulf their property so that she wouldn't have to spend her life waiting. And so she spent some time watching the city on the horizon, for weeks.

She had hoped she wouldn't have to ask the last question she asked Lars—his mind having shifted on the matter, afraid suddenly of any real responsibility, aware perhaps of what it would entail—some months later as the first snows began to fall, her belly beginning ever so slightly to swell, her menstruation having halted as abruptly as her former life. And so she watched him in that day, watched him after she felt his teeth in her, perched on her stool (feeling somewhat off-balance then, her body developing a shape with which she wasn't familiar) and watched him go to the fields, stayed until he came back, when she stepped down as he walked in the door. She stood before him with a hand against the developing contours of her midsection and she asked her last question: “What shall we name her?”

That was when Lars began beating Joanna.

#

Patterns are the music of everyone's lives, the back and forth, questions and answers, the lack of answers. A life without patterns is necessarily a life of discord. And to break a pattern? Smash the instrument—make music of its pieces hitting the ground, and move on. There is not a single good way to do this.

#

“My mother was always worrying,” said Michael. They were around a barrel fire. Liss had asked him about his mom. She had her head on his shoulder, and Jack had his head on her shoulder. They looked like a set of dominoes just set into motion.

It was winter, and cold. They were in an alley not far from the factory. Snow floated down onto their hair and melted onto their heads and they cursed aloud whenever they felt a drop worming its way down their scalp. There were lights on either side of the alley, and the addition of the barrel fire gave them each three shadows, all of which were almost the color of the air.

Michael had finally told them the truth about his leaving home.

“She was right. I mean, I did get lost. I didn't think I went far, but I just couldn't find my way home.” He sighed heavily, and his breath fogged his vision. “I thought I knew the city pretty well. I still do.”

“Well, yeah,” said Jack. “We'd be lost without you.” Liss nuzzled into Michael, and Jack lifted his head and looked over.

It was true, not that being lost would be damaging to either of them. As a child, Michael knew the area surrounding his house well, because he would explore when his mother had to work overtime on school days; she couldn't keep him locked in if he got home first, and, since she always called home about the time she would get home from work normally, Michael always knew the time at which he had to be home so she wouldn't know about his journeys. As far as he knew, she never found out.

But he had never found home again. He walked back the same way he came after the train hit Lars. Going to see him had been a mistake and he was determined to treat it as though it hadn't happened, so as he regained the sidewalk and made it back into familiar territory, he

pushed all thoughts of the truncated sidewalk and the shack and the darkness beyond the train tracks out of his mind, and walked through the hazy half-light of midnight back to where he knew his home to be, and looking forward to seeing his mother. She was wonderful on his birthdays. She would come home from work and the first thing she would do was unlock his door and hug him and kiss him on the forehead and tell him she loved him and happy birthday, and then she'd make him a cake even though she'd be tired, and then she'd give him his present. The cake was more exciting than the present—she usually gave him clothes, because that's what he needed and she couldn't afford much besides what they needed. She always reminded him of this, as though he might forget, even with chunks of plaster falling from the roof. A sudden growth spurt had even resulted in him receiving socks on the previous Christmas.

He had recognized everything that would lead him home—the sidewalk cratering just so in a given spot, the transition from dilapidated homes to those slightly less so, and even the train tracks—but follow the train tracks as he might, he never came to the proper station, and so never found his home.

“She would lock me in my room when she left,” said Michael, “except for school days.”

Liss rested her hand on his thigh, and Jack in turn rested his hand on her thigh, and, Michael saw through the corner of his eye, started to dig his fingernails into her leg. But her hand remained soft, resting rather than clutching. Jack was staring at him; he was sure her thigh would start to bleed soon.

“I would go exploring when I got the chance. It happened more than I thought it would. I don't think my mom ever knew. If she did, she probably would have stopped letting me go to school, quit her job, locked me in my room, and always stayed just outside the door to make sure I was safe.”

He could feel Jack's grip tightening, could feel the shift in his demeanor in the air. Michael kept his eyes on the fire now, but he was certain that Jack's hand was digging, claw-like, and he could feel the tension.

Liss lifted her head off of his shoulder, and he could feel the tension ease. He could feel the tears welling up in Liss's eyes.

She said, "Your mom's a control freak."

"I don't think so."

Jack said, "Just like my parents."

"No."

"No?"

He was wary of Jack now. His abuse of Liss had set in slowly, like a mold, and now it was all he could see. His quiet contempt, and the noises they made while fucking—before Michael turned sixteen, the two of them had never included crying as part of their lovemaking, but now it seemed to overshadow everything else. And the blood, the teethmarks that went too deep, the bruises (love bites, Liss called them)—they weren't even trying to hide it.

Liss sniffed wetly, and her voice cracked when she said, "So how did you get out to even get lost?"

"I broke a window and climbed out. I cut myself on the edge. It looked bad. It wasn't. Not even a scar." He was tired. "Can one of you talk about something else?" And he very nearly, but didn't, added that he missed his mother very much, and would gladly live his life in the same bedroom from which he escaped, with all his toys and his bed and guaranteed meals and someone who strove very hard to be his guardian in every sense of the word.

Jack coughed, stood up, got near the fire, said, “At least you got out of that fucking prison, man. Don't know freedom till you've got it.”

Michael threw a handful of snow at him. It broke apart on the way and fluttered around him. Even so, the gesture was not lost on him, and he scowled and stormed out of the alley.

“He'll be back,” said Liss, laying on her side, placing her head in his lap. “He just gets pissy when he isn't right. And,” she added, “when he is.”

Michael clutched her hair and wept, softly, to himself. Liss either didn't notice, or didn't say anything—she was looking into the fire. Her hair looked like it was on fire—it always did, such a deep, dark red, but the warmth of the barrel lent it an air of legitimacy. From above, their three-pronged shadow looked like a pedestal. He never wanted to move his hands. He sniffed. He wanted to speak, but was sure his voice would break.

“Something else? I tried to kill myself once,” Liss said. “I kept a bunch of nylon rope in my closet, kind of buried under all my stuff, back before I ran away. I was keeping it because I had planned on hanging myself for years. I wanted it bad; I was real depressed before I met Jack. So one day I took out the rope and I tried it. I went out to the nearest railroad crossing and I climbed one of the things with the railroad signals on it. The crossing signals, you know, with the lights and little barrier that blocks the road when a train's coming. I climbed it and I tied a knot with the rope when I got to the top and got myself steady. I remember I was really scared of falling. *Really* scared. Which is funny, considering, right? So I tied the knot—not a slipknot, because I didn't know how to do one of those. Just a regular knot. And I pulled it over my head and around my neck, and I tied the other end to the pole I was sitting on, right by the lights, and I jumped off. And the rope broke.”

She laughed. Michael couldn't tell if it was a bitter laugh.

“And I fell on my ass and it *hurt*. It really hurt. Right on the tailbone. Sitting was a bitch for a while. And all I could think was, 'I'm supposed to meet dad for breakfast.' He never actually let me call him dad. Scary motherfucker. Greasy. He always out doing his own thing and he always let me do mine, except he made me meet him for meals, always. He didn't say anything about the red mark that rope left around my neck. So I got breakfast with him, and it was always awful. And when he left, I went over to a friend's place, and then we fucked, because that's what we did after breakfast, and if you're not going to fuck afterward, then why make breakfast a special occasion, right? This was the routine almost every day: breakfast with dad, fuck-date with a friend.

“And it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. But I didn't want to upset my friend, because he was scary when he was upset. So we just kept fucking, and I started *crying* while we were fucking, and that made him upset, and he started threatening to hit me while we were fucking, and I was in so much pain that I was seeing colors. But he finished, and I left, and he was pissed off, and I ran away from home the next day and never saw him or my dad again, and I'm happy about all of that.

“But do you want to know the best thing about all of that?” And here she turned and looked up at Michael, his hands in her hair, fingers tangled. She smiled and in her smile he saw something he wanted to keep all for himself. Snow was landing on her face and there were small, still droplets of water all over her. She was crystalline.

“It was the best sex I've ever had.”

#

Joanna had the baby, and she discarded it, or she was herself discarded—she couldn't quite tell.

Lars had kept her bloodied and swollen and bruised since she revealed her pregnancy. She told herself it was because she had declared the forthcoming child a woman—she could feel its gender buzzing in her marrow. He never did answer her question about a name. She told herself—as he bit into her shoulder more fiercely than before, the surrounding flesh purple and black and swollen and pillow-soft—that he was thinking about it, despite his obvious displeasure. Lars was a thinker, was the only way she could bring herself to think she could understand him even one little bit. It was the only way she could reconcile the deliberation with which he seemed to do even the most inconsequential things.

But the months went by and more of her body was covered in bruises and cuts. He started making a sport of knocking out her teeth with punches to the mouth, and expressed disappointment when he failed. By the time she had the baby, she was missing seven, two in the very front, so that her smile, on the occasions when she forced it, was incomplete.

She gave birth on a bright spring morning, a month premature. It was unexpected; she woke in labor pains, surprised. The little girl was small and fragile. Lars had delivered the child and cut the cord and placed it in the sink. Joanna could only remember the butchered animal carcasses she'd seen skinned there, and felt no better when Lars simply began washing the child, the water steaming and clearly too hot, the baby screaming, and then, pink-bodied and too-warm, dumped onto Joanna's lap, the clear message being: take care of it.

Which she did. She held the baby close except for when Lars moved in with the intention of mounting her, and even then was swift to collect her child the moment he rolled heavily off to her side.

She never named the child. This turned out to be wise, at least for her emotional well-being. As soon as the child was able to stop nursing, Joanna left the shack in the middle of the

night, rolled out of bed as quietly as she could, and limped out to the barren dirt road and struck out in the direction of Carriage Town. She admonished herself for leaving the child, of course, particularly as she surveyed the muted palette of bruises on her hands in the light of the full moon, like a child's finger painting. It would have hurt her entire body to carry any more weight than herself. It hurt her entire body to carry herself. Her shoulder was surely infected and had been for some time, mounds of swelling built up around the dental imprint, yellow-white pus filling the mold. The swelling made her body look off-balance. Her body was softer than it should have ever been, with all the damaged flesh. Lars would surely not treat the child as he had treated her. Lars could be tender—she recollected this from their time early on—and he surely would be with a baby.

So she limped all night, until, when the sun rose, Carriage Town was no longer a distant feature of the horizon but a tangible object before her, a goal about to be reached. There was a checkpoint and guards and a heavy steel door blocking passage. The walls were higher than she imagined, and, from there, seemed to end where it met the smoke overhead. Carriage Town existed in a murky, constant twilight, the sky overhead split along boundaries that shifted with the patterns of the smoke; she suspected, even outside, she would be in the dark if the wind shifted just so.

She was rebuffed when she asked to get in. She was rebuffed when she offered sexual favors to get in. She was pushed roughly to ground when she tried to go in when they opened the gate for a car. One guard leveled a rifle at her and told her to leave, repeated himself when she said that she had nowhere to go. She finally moved when he shot the ground next to her; the gunshot smelled of ginger, however slightly. It lent the guard an air of familiarity.

Joanna skulked down the road before going back toward the city through the rough, high grasses, some distance from the checkpoint. The grass scratched her thighs, further frayed the hem of her dress. She touched the wall—it was more of a patchwork than she expected, scrap riveted to scrap, jagged corners jutting out. It was too tall and too sharp to climb, and so she walked around it, reaching her fingers out every so often to brush against the steel. She was still walking when night fell, but at some point she stopped reaching out, stopped confirming that Carriage Town was still right next to her, and as the sun bruised the sky before her she found herself walking in loam, sinking to her ankles with every step,, a massive concrete structure standing tall all around her. She looked up, around: behind her was Carriage Town, so far away, all patchy, rusted metal, and surrounding her was a complicated concrete structure, all complicated and inverted staircases and ducts, bleached by the sun. It all looked so brittle, and it was tilted ever so slightly, as if it too had been sinking in the dirt. Directly above her was a plaque in the concrete that read: CARRIAGE TOWN GRAND FOUNTAIN, EST—. And the date was illegible, maybe scratched out, maybe eroded. She couldn't tell, and didn't spend more than a glance trying to figure it out.

What she stared at for a long moment was a footpath worn bald in the thin patches of grass just ahead. She followed it to a giant pipe in the side of a ridge, overlooking a river below. There was a grate, but the bars were spaced far enough apart for her to get in—she could only imagine it leading to one place. And so she went in, didn't look back (an act she would regret, in the future, on days when she would tell her son about the sun and the grass and the blue, blue sky, and he would—not at first, but eventually—look at her with a cloud over his eyes that said he knew it all to be a fairy tale, because what else could such nonsense be?), and when the steel overhead blotted out the sun, and when the blue, flickering lights lit her from all around—the

shadows of her legs and her arms pressed against the walls a kind of kabuki theatre—she felt as though she were a projection, insubstantial. She lost any concept of time. She heard only the dull thrum of machinery echoing around her.

#

The snow had started to come heavier, and the air had become crisper, and it stung when they inhaled and crackled in their nostrils when they exhaled. The barrel fire had gone out; Liss and Michael ran out of things to keep it going, having thrown in even their full boxes of cereal, hoping it would keep the fire going just a little longer. They were cold and huddled together, Liss cursing him under her breath all the while for driving Jack away.

“And all because you're too attached to your mother,” she said. “You grew up in a fucking prison, it sounds like.” And still she pressed up against him, and it seemed to him that she did so more because she didn't want to move than because she was grateful for the body heat. He imagined tying her hair to his arm in the hope of keeping her near.

Michael thought about telling her that it was something he grew to like, being alone in a room for much of the day. There were times when he grew impatient—but it was that isolation that made human contact so special to him. Had his mother *not* locked him up while she was gone, he reasoned, he would not have loved her as he did, he would not have sang to her on her birthdays, he would not have *remembered* her birthday, or even bothered to find out the day. He had practiced singing for days before, and even practiced going off-key and making his voice break at certain points, because he felt that his mother found such mistakes cute, liked to attribute them to childhood and the fact that she had a son who was still growing and still needed her because there were some things that he just couldn't do or couldn't do very well—he knew this intuitively, couldn't help but feel it in her mannerisms toward him, since, outside of school, she

was the only person in his life, and contact with her was, he felt, the only meaningful contact in his life for his first eight years. He missed her. He had missed her before he even realized that he was lost.

He didn't tell Liss any of this; he was about to try, the words feeling their way from the back of his throat, when Jack came back.

The light was behind him, but even seeing him as a kind of silhouette in the snow and the hazy air, Michael still saw, distinctly, the peculiar hang of his jaw. He cradled a paper bag in one arm and he said, "Come on, you two. We're sleeping inside tonight." His voice was softer, less amazed than ever.

Liss jumped up and ran, threw her arms around him, and bottles clinked in his bag. She looked happier than ever, her wide mouth stretched in an actual smile, as opposed to the one she always wore. It wasn't often that she did that.

Michael stood slowly and walked a few paces behind the Liss and Jack. Liss was hanging off of him and shivering, arms wrapped around his free arm, and she kept asking him what was in the bag and where they were sleeping and how did he get a space indoors, and he kept telling her to hush.

Michael stepped alongside their footprints in the snow, certain that Jack was going to do something to him to show his displeasure—this was the first real conflict the two of them had, and he was worried about how it would play out. He hunched inside his coat.

And he bumped into Jack's back, felt the denim jacket against his cheek, heard the bottles clink, and Liss stepped back, and Jack chuckled.

"Where I come from," he said, "people watch where they're going." He smiled through the fog of his breath.

“You come from the same place as me.” Whispered, like a secret, like he might get hurt for saying it aloud. Jack wasn't fond of Carriage Town—not any of it. He had said in private that his statements about wanting a nice house near the city's hub was just an indulgence for Liss.

“I've been out before, though, is the thing,” said Jack, and he coughed and spread his arms and said, “This is it.” They were in front of a small motel, with a sign that anyone could miss; it took Michael a moment to figure out what the place was, because he had to really look for the sign.

Michael laughed. Liss looked halfway between giddy and hit-by-a-truck. The lights outside the one-story building were a brighter yellow than the city lights, and their faces looked lit by a smoky sunset.

“Bullshit,” said Michael. “Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit.” A litany: he wanted to discredit Jack, or at least make him feel discredited, for what he had said about his mother. He loved his mother more than anything, though he couldn't articulate why.

But Jack, too, reminded him of his mother in that Jack was always telling him stories. He liked listening to stories. Even if they weren't true. Especially if they weren't true.

“It's true,” said Jack as he unlocked the door to their room. A car drove by and its headlights lit them up like a flashbulb. “My parents were controlling, but they had money. We lived outside of the city for something like a year.”

He led the way into the room, turned on the lights. Brown carpet, walls a slightly lighter shade of brown, a phone with a slot for coins on the table next to the television, a fridge underneath, and a bed large enough for four people. The room smelled like a bathroom, and the bathroom smelled like urine splashed with ammonia. Jack pulled two bottles of whiskey out of the bag and placed them on the table. Michael and Liss sat next to each other on the bed.

“And I had to go with them—I was, like, eight at the time, I had thought about running away, but I was too young to really take care of myself, and I knew that.” He paused a moment, looked at Michael. “Sorry,” he said. “But, so, I remember we took a train as far out as we could, we left our car at home. And the platform was real dingy; I didn't know they let the platforms get broken down, but they really let this one go to hell.” He opened one of the bottles of whiskey, took a swig, passed it to Liss, who held it as if it might bite her.

“So we get to this dingy platform, and there's a guy with a car waiting for us, real young guy, tall, skinny, but looks like a teenager, slicked-back hair, looks shady. But he has a truck, and we get in, and he drives it right over the tracks, and there's this path, right? Like, through the woods.” He walked to the window and, after looking out for a moment, drew the curtains.

“Drink some or pass it, Liss.” She gave the bottle to Michael, who drank deeply, quickly.

“Bullshit,” said Michael, voice rough, suppressing a cough.

Liss asked, “How'd you get the room and stuff?”

Jack got the other bottle of whiskey and sat down heavily on the bed. Michael, who was drinking more, spilled some on himself. Jack drank.

“So eventually we come out of the woods. We were driving for an hour or so.

“And I saw the sun,” he said

“Bullshit,” the bottle halfway gone in his hands.

“I can't even describe it. We've got so much fucking smog here. But I saw the sun. And the sky was *blue*. Not black. Like, a real blue. Blue like Liss's eyes. Fucking *clear*. I want to see that again.” He sighed. “I was thinking about this while I was walking around, you know, blowing off some steam after you” to Michael, “threw that snow at me.” A smile. “After you *tried* to throw that snow at me.

“I went out and I got some money. I got car keys. We just need to find the car. Then we can go. I want to go.”

Michael's bottle was empty.

Liss shook a little, said “How'd you get that stuff?”

“Bullshit!” Michael's voice was a shriek. He stood. The litany: “Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit,” told himself it was all a lie, and he threw the empty bottle past Jack and at the window, where it thunked and the window rattled and the bottle landed softer than Michael felt it should have. No glass had cracked. Michael's arm felt like a wet paper bag.

Jack laughed, grabbed Michael by the shoulders, pulled him down to the edge of the bed, where he sat rigidly, and Jack said, “Is this about what I said about your mom?”

Michael's head lolled.

Liss said, “He was pretty upset.” She leaned over, so both of them were in Michael's frame of vision.

Jack said, “Really, man?” That slow-amazed quality lurking at the edges of the syllables, “Sounds like you were a prisoner. You'd think you would realize something was wrong, at least.” Michael tensed, Jack said, “I'm not trying to piss you off. I want to get out of this city with Liss *and* with you. But,” he said, now kneeling in front of Michael, hands on his shoulder, looking into eyes that would not meet his, “I'm worried that you think that was okay. Your mom locking you up. That's fucking *possessive*, man. I mean, *no*—that's not okay.”

Michael disagreed, of course, but, on drunken reflection, didn't want to be kicked out of a warm room on a winter night, didn't want to get off of the soft bed. He lifted Jack's hands from his shoulders more forcibly than intended and threw himself backwards, and sunk into the

mattress, felt like he had fallen into a giant lump of mashed potatoes. Liss placed a hand on his forehead, stroked his hair, worked her fingers through the tangles.

Outside. Maybe his mother had left the city, burned the house, maybe that's why he couldn't find it. He had looked, over the years. Always tried to guide the three of them to his home since they trusted his directions, since he claimed knew the city better than them—though he never mentioned to them that his wanderings were limited and aimless, much like theirs. It made him feel old, though now the roles were reversed: he the child, throwing tantrums all day, soothed by a fake father.

Jack said, “That's what I was hoping for!” Victorious. “You just need to *relax*. Let us take care of you a little bit.” He held out the half-empty bottle to Liss, who shook her head, still running her hand along Michael's hair. Had she looked away from him, she would have seen Jack give a little scowl and empty the bottle in one fluid motion. He dropped the bottle near the other one, and when the two clinked together Liss looked over, and right as she looked over Jack's mouth was against hers, and he climbed on top of her, pushed her body down next to Michael's.

What happened next, Michael remembers hazily, like Carriage Town's midday light, like any of Carriage Town's light, though he had sat beside and watched it happen before in alleys and in parks, in places where Jack and Liss thought they wouldn't be found, or places where they hoped they would be found. This was the first time it happened in a truly private space, and Michael felt at least a little welcome this time.

And unzipping of his pants, and a hand on him as quickly as he could imagine. The two of them next to him, clothes coming off in small waves, like echoes of a sonar: first one, then the other, and again and again until nothing remained and Liss's mouth was on Michael and Jack was

in Liss. And a lack of response from Michael. And a more vigorous attitude from Liss. And still no response, though Michael, from the deep recesses of his brain, was willing himself to respond, or to move, or to do *something*, until he gave up willing, and Liss gave up trying, and she was simply laying on top of him and being fucked, and Michael, feeling more and more alienated, put a hand on her back, pushed the grunting and the moaning out of his consciousness, and could feel himself losing consciousness, slowly, like he was sinking in mud, until Jack grunted and they both collapsed on top of him, and he fell asleep entirely.

He was the first one awake in the morning. Jack and Liss had pulled themselves from on top of him, and were cuddled together, limbs draped over one another. He stumbled to the bathroom, head feeling like a sack of stones. Things were fuzzy around the edges; he felt like there was a thin film over every bit of him. He urinated in the toilet, which had a black, desiccated sludge lining its base. He leaned over it, a palm against the wall, fighting to urge to vomit. He would not; he repeated this to himself. He would keep it all in. The floor looked to be an old white, covered in the urine stains of thousands. The shower was a small, confined, stand-up unit with slimy walls and overhead light that wouldn't turn on. He smelled like someone who had spent the night at the bottom of an orgy, a bodily rotten-fruit smell, and he turned on the water and instantly felt more comfortable than he had in years, because it was the first shower he had had in a long time and he was sure it was the best. He kept the water just hot enough to hurt.

When he was done, he turned off the water and rested his forehead against the slimy wall; he was about to close his eyes when he saw a shadow through the frosted glass of the door.

“Do you feel better?” Liss's voice was punctuated by a splash of urine. The wet creak of the opening door and there she was, naked on the toilet. She looked smaller, somehow; her hair a

dark spillage over her chest, like a too-small blanket. She looked cold, gooseflesh all over. She looked at her feet. "I'm sorry you couldn't get involved last night," she said. "I tried."

He stepped out of the shower, looked down at her. "I drank too much," he said, "and I like it better when it's just us." He closed the shower door, leaned back against it. "I tried, too."

Another splash of urine. The space between them was small. He was somehow more comfortable with her like this than he was when they were alone, freezing in an alley, needing each other to stay warm. He didn't want to be so necessary. Jack lay crumpled in a mass of blankets within sight. Michael's penis hung limp in front of him, his body dripping water.

Liss grunted, "We could try again now."

And Michael said no. "You should take a shower," he said.

She did.

Michael sat on the bed to air dry; Jack turned over and smiled at him. "Wanted to get in on it'?"

Michael apologized for throwing things at him the day before.

"Yeah, but it was kind of fun. And if you hadn't pissed me off, we wouldn't be here, and we wouldn't have our ticket out of this shithole of a city. So we're good." He rolled out of bed, stood, stretched his arms wide. He peeked outside. The light just outside their door lit him up, the little filaments of blond hair all over him, drawings pockmarking his skin. He tied his hair back. The clink of his mother's necklace.

Michael picked up his clothes, dressed. They were stiff from filth. They smelled like the Michael of yesterday, the Michael of the past eight years, and that made him uncomfortable. But he put them on nonetheless.

Jack said, “So?” and Michael turned to see him smiling, his teeth a visible shade of brown, his naked body lit up in yellow from outside, body covered in what looked like pre-school drawings. “You want to leave? See the sun?”

The pipe issued an audible shudder, and the shower gurgled as Liss stepped out and started looking for a towel.

“Yeah,” he said. He didn't hesitate.

CHAPTER II

THE SCENIC ROUTE

The smell of ginger never left her nostrils; Joanna was wary of everyone.

She climbed into Carriage Town through a sewer grate after days of wandering walkways over rivers of sludge. The first things she saw when she poked her head through the threshold was a train, all sparks and shrieking steel and smoke so thick she could only see to the next streetlamp. She saw a sidewalk that looked like a series of strung-together craters, jagged plates of concrete jutting into the air. She was disappointed in the lack of luxury around her. It was a message to Joanna: the world is not as you anticipate it. She regretted not bringing her knife. She regretted also not bringing her child, though only harm would have come to it. Still, in the walk to Carriage Town, and in passing the threshold of the gate, her greatest fear had become precisely one of being alone. And she was very afraid, then.

Joanna's idea of cities was precisely that of someone who hasn't been inside of a city before: large, overwhelming, with no room for non-human life. Anything more concrete than that took on the role of unbelievability. And while two of her preconceptions would turn out to be true, she was nevertheless not open to seeing them, as her prejudgments crystallized as she left Lars, and, for the most part, remained as such for the entirety of her life.

But then, Carriage Town was not a typical city. But then, there was no way for her to know.

The tunnel had stretched before her that day, jaundiced lights overhead and sludge below. Decomposed bodies were caught up against the grate where she had entered, limbs splayed out

as through trying to stay, limbs tangled together as though trying to stay together. She saw a body floating in the sludge below, moving toward the grate. Her steps echoed and the walkway shook as she moved. The path, at least, was straight; there were no decisions to be made.

Her legs were starting to tire, though—she at least knew that much. She had walked throughout the night and the next day and probably the next night. She couldn't keep track in the tunnel. She never tired, then. She had resolve, then, even though she had left her child. What was a child to her then? A cure for loneliness, at best. Joanna felt no ties to the thing because of shared blood, or because it had grown and lived inside of her for eight months (early, even—was this the daughter rejecting the mother at such an early stage?), or because it had been the result of a man she loved but had to leave because of his broken promises. He would have told her, she knew, that the promises were simply not yet fulfilled. But Joanna knew better. It was the only problem she had with their relationship, and it was a big one. And though her shoulder was swollen and pus-filled, though she felt feverish whenever she looked at it, though he never explained anything to her and took her whenever he wanted her—these were things she loved about the man. He kept her from having to make thousands of little decisions, allowed her time to coast, essentially, to dream and to wonder and to be upset about not understanding how to cook or farm or fix machines. These worries really were a privilege, she realized—these worries were what she loved about Lars.

But the one thing she expected above all else was for promises to be kept. So she walked steadily, shoulder stinging from sweat. It had been cool, the air, and as it began to sting her lungs she walked faster, footsteps clanking like a hobbled machine, and she was sorry, with every intake of breath, that she had left. But the city, no longer a far-off dream, or a pockmark on the horizon, loomed large before her. There were intersections in the tunnel, certainly, but the pipes

were smaller; she wanted to emerge in the city proper, and feared that a smaller pipe would only lead her to another drainage outlet. The lights caught the sweat on her forehead, lent a sparkle to the rivulets of blood on her legs; it made her face chalk-like, accentuated her paleness and the angles of her face. She looked gaunt and ghostly. She could tell she looked like a ghoul by looking at her hand—it glowed. Her skin was corpse-like. She felt like a corpse. She was tired. So what, then? So why, then, keep going? She had the mad idea of curling up there and sleeping and never waking up. She felt that she had somehow used up all of the awakenings allowed her in one lifetime, and in the same thought dismissed it as madness.

Awakenings. She almost laughed.

Lars had essentially plucked her out of a vast nothingness. She had not existed, and then she had. Waking up must have been as natural as anything else she could have done, because she did not remember waking up the first day she remembered, but she *did* recall that she killed a rabbit that day, and that she cooked it by tossing it, fur and all, onto an open flame. It smelled terrible, all burning hair and blood, charring meat. The eyes are what she remembered most vividly, both as she stepped on it accidentally while looking for an animal to kill, the crunch and the glance downward at the eye peeking out from under her shoe, all surprise, and in the fire, darkening with the rest of the body until it didn't look like an eye anymore.

She fished it out of the fire with a stick. She hacked the crispy hide off with her knife—which had always existed in her memory (until she tossed it into the grass when Lars took her in)—and ate what she could bring herself to eat, grease and flakes of blackened flesh sticking to her chin, and she slept by the dying fire, and vomited when she woke up in the morning.

She lived like this for weeks. She never tried to dress the animals before throwing it on the fire, because she feared having to deal with any more blood than absolutely necessary, and

she never tried to cook the animals any other way than throwing them directly into the fire, because she did not wish to be any more creative with death than absolutely necessary, and because she feared ruining the flesh any more significantly than had become her custom. She feared waste.

She did not see any disconnects in her logic.

So she killed and she ate and she wandered, sometimes through the grass and sometimes on the roads. She didn't have any idea where to go because her first memory was of accidentally breaking a rabbit's neck and looking into its eye, pressurized—she thought—beneath her boot. But she felt she should keep moving, at the very least, even if she was moving in circles—a distinct possibility, since she wandered in the direction of her whims each time she woke up. And she woke up often, stopping to nap sometimes twice a day, and never feeling comfortable moving in the night. She would start a fire as the sun set and she would remain in that place until sunrise.

She feared the dark. She never overcame her fear of the dark. (Carriage Town nearly paralyzed her, limited her functions, forced her into a necessary, inescapable one-dimensionality, permanently.)

This habit shifted one night when she caught the world on fire. That's what she told herself: that she caught the world on fire. Because what other world had she known? She always set her fires up in the ditches by the roadside. These were dirt and the grass was near enough for her to gather and to light in her chosen spot. And this was well and this was good. But it was windy that night, and a car passed by her, its headlights dissolving the darkness momentarily. She had a pile of grass and sticks and she was struggling with creating a spark with the stones she carried. And something that had never happened before occurred: the car stopped on the

roadside above her. Voices. Directions. The opening of the trunk: the opening of the mechanism something that sparked the image of a car trunk in her mind, somehow. And then a tumbling above, and closer, and closer, and a body next to her, on the pile. The eyes staring into hers. She could see them in the dark, those eyes. It was her first contact with human eyes. The dead man had red hair that was much too bright.

Joanna had a dead rabbit at her side, whose skull she had crushed with a rock, from a distance. It didn't have discernable eyes any longer, which is what made it less threatening to her. But the corpse before her, all shadow and red hair save for the moonlight reflected in its eyes. She couldn't eat, then; she struggled not to vomit. She just wanted to be rid of it, and she feared travelling at night, and so she struggled all the harder to spark her stones, which she did, and the grass caught, and corpse caught next. It was naked and too young and too shriveled in places. She guessed he was maybe ten years old. She watched him burn, but had to back away when it became too hot, and then had to make a decision when a small patch of grass caught near him, which caught the larger field above on fire. And soon she was almost surrounded.

Joanna scampered up the hill and into the road. Taillights were streaking away through the darkness. And from that vantage point she saw the fire spreading quickly, the wind tossing it everywhere, the wind roaring in her ears. Her face felt like it was cracking, like the skin was stretched too far and might just snap like fruit-flesh at a knife blade. She was hungry. She had to move at night. But then, it hardly felt like night, what with the ever-growing fire casting light onto everything. There was only a small worry, far in the back of her mind, that one of these eventual pieces of tinder might be her. But the eyes were no longer visible to her, and she could see, and these were the important things, and she struck out in the direction the fire seemed to be

spreading most voraciously, walked along the roadside while the fire kept pace, always, like an otherworldly presence, or a signal.

She walked, and she was cold, keeping her hands deep in her pockets, but the fire took the edge off, turned the cold into a kind of softness, a gentle prodding—just as the fire had been, just as the fire had prodded her into movement. She had wanted to stay put until she was inside the fire, until she could forget the little that she remembered, but her tolerance for pain was, at that time, too limited. She couldn't do it. And so she went, watching the displacement of the gravel underfoot in the moonlight and the firelight, listening to the stones shuffle at her feet, both of which struck her as something she didn't want to give up, ever. She walked, and when she finally looked up she saw splashes of light in the distance, neither firelight nor sunlight, turned around to see that the fire was far behind her, but larger than she thought possible, spreading for miles. It was all she could see when she looked back, that fire, all she could smell when she inhaled, the smoke, the scent of burning grass, an artificial sunrise, the air tipped with orange all around. When she looked above her she couldn't see the moon for all the smoke. It made her feel lonelier than she had felt when she stepped on the rabbit.

She was hungry.

She walked.

By the time the sun had risen, had drowned out the firelight and given perspective to the smoke—which took up much of the sky and much of the distance—she had wandered into the outer limits of a town. She walked on a smooth sidewalk rather than a gravelly shoulder. There were storefronts in clusters, strip malls (another thing she would tell her son about, that Carriage Town lacked, that he would never believe). Power lines stretched all over from telephone poles

to telephone pole. There were cars and there was an intersection and there was a stoplight. She had only seen one car passing her by at a time before—to see so many made her uncomfortable.

She kept walking. The smell of smoke followed her. When she looked back, she could see it rising like a beacon.

She was really very hungry.

Emergency vehicles passed, all lights and sirens, toward her beacon.

And then a cat-call, from somewhere. A voice complimenting her body. She squinted, looked around her. Even then, her hair was pale enough to be mistaken for grey, and it was in her eyes, along with the sun. She heard it again, with a whistle, and a hand touched her shoulder, and there were two men, then. She wondered why nobody else was there, out on the street, why there were only cars and nobody outside of them. They looked exactly the same to her. Men all looked like men, and women all looked like women. Why would these men find her body remarkable? Her body was like a woman's body, and that was all. But their eyes did not look like the dead person's eyes, and that was enough for her.

And so she told them, "I'm really very hungry."

And one of them, the one with his hand on her shoulder, smiled and said, "How hungry?"

"Very," she said, and looked at the smoke in the air, above their heads. She noticed them looking at her exposed neck, all springy flesh and collarbone, and when he asked her to get in his car, she did; they left the other man behind; and when first she was inside his apartment, she went directly to his fridge, ate the first thing that appeared edible, which happened to be half of a loaf of pre-packaged bread. She stuffed a slice into her mouth at a time, wadded up, and chewed drily, eyeing him standing by the doorway all the while. It helped. He was kind enough to let her finish eating.

He said, “You didn’t lie.”

“No.” Her voice was whisper-like indoors, like she was afraid of waking anyone, including herself.

“I figured it was a come-on.”

“No.”

And he reached under her dress, no-doubt thinking he was caressing when he was more-or-less *palming* her, but sure enough of himself that she was willing to accept his use of her as payment for his food; it made sense to her that something necessary for survival was being given for something, in her mind, that was nowhere near as valuable. It was acceptable, rather than agreeable. And so she did not resist when he lifted her dress over her head, or when he put his mouth to hers, or when he lifted her up and carried her to his bed, or when he penetrated her; she did not resist, save for when he was about to crest, when she put her hands to his chest and sat up and pushed him out of her and off the bed and onto the floor, his ejaculate arcing into the air along with him. They looked at each other in silence for a long moment, him on the floor growing flaccid, her on the bed looking down, drops of semen perforating the space between them. The clock on the wall ticked. His bedroom was clean and nondescript: nothing on the walls, nothing on the nightstand or the dresser, nothing on the floor save him. He could have been anyone.

He said, “I’m sorry,” as she stood and started rifling through his dresser and his closet. She put on a pair of slacks and a white button-down shirt, and took a belt, which seemed to make everything fit well enough, despite all the empty space inside. In the other room, she picked her foldable knife from a pocket in her dress and put it in a pocket in the slacks, then opened the

fridge again, pulled out some old mashed potatoes and a spoon and sat at his table, spooning potatoes into her mouth and watching him. He was just beginning to stand up.

When he made a move to pick his pants off the floor, she said, with a mouthful of food, “What are you doing?” She had stopped chewing.

“I’m going to get dressed,” he said.

She pulled out her knife, unfolded it, and stabbed it into the table. The bowl of potatoes vibrated, and he started. She hadn’t recommenced chewing.

“This is my home,” he said. He looked like a wounded animal, posture bent. He looked like he felt he should cover himself. When he took a step Joanna pulled the knife out (rattling the table in doing so) and plunged it downward again. He looked as though he would curl in on himself and never be undone. His eyes like little marbles; his eyes were what she watched.

She chewed. She ate. He shivered in place. The scrapes of her spoon against the bottom of the bowl cut against the ticking of the clock, and he twitched, maybe to rush at her, maybe to get his clothes, and, maybe, just to twitch, as impulse controllable or otherwise—but Joanna threw the bowl at his head, and no sooner had he fallen to the ground than Joanna was sitting on his chest, her knife at his throat, his flaccid dick against the thigh of her slacks and rapidly retreating. She could feel it, though, his dick, feel the little wet spot blooming against her thigh, and it made her angrier.

“I just wanted to eat,” she said.

Her kneecaps were digging into his shoulder blades, leaning over him, the knife as close as she could imagine it without cutting. His forehead was bleeding.

She didn’t want to cut him. She said, “I don’t want to cut you.” And still she leaned over him. She thought he may have mouthed, “I’m sorry,” but she was too intent on the knife against

neck-flesh to bother reading lips. When he actually said it, she stabbed the floor next to his head and he let out a yelp.

“I was very hungry,” she said, and added, when he remained wide-eyed and shaking and silent, “You thought it was a come-on. That I was hungry,” and, when he said nothing and did nothing, she screamed, “My hunger’s funny?”

She put the knife away, laughed, and she rocked back onto the balls of feet and stood and laughed some more. “You,” she said, “are really an asshole.” She stepped away from him toward the window, looked outside, the traffic below, said, “Where are we?” Said, “Where’d you take me?” It had started snowing outside.

“I haven’t been around for very long,” she said. She felt as though she might cry. She didn’t. When she looked back, he hadn’t moved, just stared, all wide-eyed.

And so she left, and so it went. Joanna thought of this as prostitution, and repeated it whenever she was hungry. She otherwise wandered, slept under awnings and in doorways and, when she was able to get inside, buildings abandoned and otherwise. Sometimes she stayed the night with someone, taking their food and throwing their stuff and threatening them in the morning. She never went peacefully, was never inclined to do so. She would eat their food until they woke up, belly stretched and distended, sometimes to the point of nearly vomiting, sometimes to the point of actually vomiting.

But she killed someone, eventually, and that was trouble. She had become adept at picking targets who were, in so many ways, passive—who would, in so many ways, let her have her way once they had had theirs. But this one didn’t; she had screamed (and he had screamed back) and thrown things at him (which he had thrown back) and when she asked him where they

were, he told her (“you’re with me, just with me”). And his smell overtook her, kept her from smelling anything save for ginger. He was all-encompassing like that.

When he followed her out the door, into the hallway of his apartment building as she made a beeline for the stairs, she got spooked and stabbed him in the chest, wrestled him to the ground and stabbed him again and again and again until it sounded like she was churning a slop bucket and she was bespattered and slick to her elbows with blood.

And that was when he introduced himself.

And after that he took her to the countryside and said they were going to start a farm, and promised to take her to the city eventually. Joanna didn’t remember leaving that building, or cleaning up the blood, but the blood had been the main thing, she was finally remembering, the main thing she had forgotten. She asked herself only once what had happened in the interval, how she had transitioned from killing Lars to loving him, from stabbing him to running away with him, and, receiving no answer, she let the question rest.

Her shadows were painted around the tunnel like blood in the dark, all slick and colorless and inscrutable. She wasn’t sure how long she had been walking, only that she saw a ladder that, distantly overhead, led to a grate, yellow light sifting through overhead. She climbed and she managed to push the grate upward and aside.

When she emerged, the electric lights and smoke—dense above and hazy before her, stinging her eyes—seemed so total and encompassing that she knew that she had found her home, that this place could never again not be home, never again a feature of the horizon or something discussed from a distance. She feared it, but there was no leaving such a place. The road ran parallel to a set of train tracks. She walked along the train tracks, then, and knew they would take her somewhere.

Joanna was home, and she knew it.

#

It was the only time he had ever felt Liss's hair in the crook of his arm as a series of separate fibers—each hair moving individually, clean, not matted. She had showered at the motel the night before, that morning, and again a moment earlier, in the house, and she smelled better than he thought she could smell and felt better and softer than he thought she could feel, and it filled him with joy, and he wanted nothing more at that moment than to fuck her. She was already nude.

They were on a red leather couch; it felt like they were sinking into a lump of mashed potatoes. The room was spacious and there was a television in front of them as large as the bookcases lining the walls behind them. The walls were wood-paneled. Expensive. They kept the television off. Liss nuzzled against him. She smelled of a vague citrus, like whomever had created the shampoo had never had any contact with any citrus. The scent made him want to fuck her.

He told her so.

They could hear Jack upstairs—the occasional shout at no one, the tumbling of drawers being thrown at walls, the screech of metal hangers torn across metal rods before clattering to the floor, the dry crack of drywall being broken, and the unmistakable thump of Jack's body hitting the floor. More yelling.

Michael said, “Can we?” He whispered it. He hardly recognized his voice. It was softer than he thought it could be. He always felt tentative with her. He kept his hand on her arm, his elbow wrapped around her shoulder. He didn't know how to be assertive with her. He didn't know how to take her. He wanted to know.

She mumbled at him, indistinctly. He took it to mean that she didn't want to fuck.

Another crash upstairs.

Jack got the money for the hotel, as well as the car keys, he said by mugging the wealthiest-looking person he could find. Liss had forced him to tell her when they came to the man's house and Jack simply unlocked the front door. He had found the man and killed him because he looked wealthy, and then, because his house was across town, he used some of the money in the man's wallet to get some whiskey and the motel room, before bringing all of them to the man's house, address provided by his I.D. Jack refused to show them the I.D.

The reaction from Liss and Michael was: why didn't we do something like this sooner? It was just a more extreme version of what they did for fun, of beating up charitable strangers. Why not take their homes, too?

But Jack had seemed to know this place. There was no searching quality about him as they entered, as he started rifling through every drawer in his path, as he made his way upstairs. He was looking for something and he had an idea of where to look.

For their parts, Liss took a shower and Michael ate some cold chicken and potatoes from the fridge. She wanted him to take a shower, too, had told him that it might be his last chance for a while, but he still felt clean from that morning, and the idea of cleaning himself again made him uncomfortable. So he sat on the couch after he ate and he listened to faint sound of water rushing through pipes and to the crashing and the thumps and cursing from upstairs, and he waited for someone to join him.

The train ride over had unnerved him. He avoided train rides because they all unnerved him since he couldn't find his way home. Always looking out the window, always thinking everything on the other side of the glass looked familiar, always berating himself for not

knowing why, and always feeling like every stop was one he needed to get off at. For a time, he did just that, bolted off the train whenever the doors opened, looked to his left and his right and his left and his right and all around again and again until he was certain that he truly didn't know where he was. He was so afraid of passing his home and missing it, so afraid that he'd forget what it looked like or forget he even had a home, or that his mother wouldn't remember him or that she was happier without him that he couldn't help himself. He did this for years. The trains were free in Carriage Town and he had nowhere else to be most of the time, so there was nothing stopping him from indulging these impulses. Always when he stepped off the train, the sense of familiarity vanished, which was why, when he attached himself to Liss and Jack, they berated him for it, though they always got off with him, until, finally, predictably, they tired of what they perceived as a game he was playing with them that had an end that they couldn't identify. It made them wary; they started grabbing hold of him whenever the train would stop and, though he knew they wouldn't let him go, his muscles still tightened under their grip.

They made no secret of not believing his story about simply getting lost. They made no secret of thinking he was putting on a show whenever he said a place looked familiar. They distrusted his account of the past to the point where Michael loved them despite himself, had to believe they loved him when they held him to keep him from running, when he fucked Liss and when he cuddled with both of them, when Jack gave him the little red wagon tattoo, the only one he had accepted.

Michael never told them about Lars, never thought to tell them about Lars—they had never asked what happened before he realized he was lost, so why should he fill in that blank? Which was why it struck Jack and Liss by some surprise when—long after they thought they had finally broken Michael of his propensity to dash off the train at every stop, and on their way to

the mugged man's house—Michael yelled “That's him!” and ran off the train and off the platform and into the gravelly area between a set of train tracks, the two of them recovering just in time to get off the train before it left and stay with Michael.

A train passed on the other side of the platform just as they got off, obscuring Michael in a great mechanical rush; when it passed, he was just getting to his feet, a new tear along the leg of his jeans, blood gushing outward onto his shoe, and he was staring across yet another set of tracks.

They went to him. He stumbled as he stood and Jack was there to wrap Michael's arm around him. Liss was on the other side. She was yelling at him. He couldn't hear her through the fog in his head, and he was too enamored with the house just past the tracks, the house with the broken windows and with chains drawn all around it, as if to try and hold all its walls together, as if the whole place would float away without some extra weight.

Michael leaned his head on Jack's shoulder there, between the train tracks, their feet sinking and shifting in the gravel, the train passing in front of them—and when it had gone, he said, “I saw him go in there,” and then he closed his eyes and let himself be led back to the train platform and would say nothing more until he was on the couch, Liss curled against him, sleeping, having put his earlier trespass in the past, and him desperately wanting to fuck her, telling her so as softly as he could manage, his voice as light as the air, intoning, “Please, please,” her body light and warm and sweet-smelling against him, his plea putting off the time till Jack would come downstairs and ask him why he ran off the train again, “Please, please,” the only word that meant anything just then.

#

The people in Carriage Town would hide, as was their nature. They would leave their homes to go to work at the factory and leave their work at the factory to go home. It was not a place filled with distractions per se—they were abundant but not apparent. No sooner would an entertainment venue be set on fire than be advertised, for that was the death knell of any business. Carriage Town was, like the factory, built to thrive on the underground, on what rested below the surface, on what a newcomer—as well as most others—would not see.

It was never a matter, though, of shunning the idea of communication. It never is, and never will be. Carriage Town is not so unlike any other place, just as any other place is not so unlike Carriage Town.

Everywhere is just a subtle shift in the pattern of everywhere else. Everywhere is a metaphor for everywhere. So what value is a place, or even the idea of a place?

#

The hands Joanna felt that day were the kindest, softest hands she had felt in her entire life. At what point the hands became the stand-in for the man, she couldn't say. But the hands. Fingers massaged her scalp, her shoulders, the fleshy ditches around her collarbone. The hands turned her over, made her feel her weight—it felt so strange, to feel her weight. She didn't know what she wanted. The world was, in that moment, all sensation and amorphous colors winking behind her eyelids. Palms pressing into her back. Fingers along her spine, igniting more colors in her closed eyes, flashes and starbursts, tiny universes spinning out of control—this is what the hands created.

Lars's hands had been rough; when he ran his hand along her body, it felt as though her skin would tear off. There was a delay in his touch, a *pulling* that happened without any effort.

His body was clingy, and when his hands were on her she couldn't help but feel that his hands would always be on her, because how could they ever leave? They had stuck.

And so she knew she would have to open her eyes, knew she was beginning to wake up, when she started to notice the calluses on the fingers, when the hands started to feel rough-hewn against her skin, like she was being rubbed down with a fistful of gravel. These hands were abrasive.

She opened her eyes.

They were Lars's hands, all largeness and callus. And they were connected to Lars, his ginger scent flooding her nostrils then, his shirtfront bloodied from when she'd stabbed him, back when she first met him. She had expected his breathing to sound like rattling in a wet sack. It didn't. Some things refused to change.

He said, "You're awake," and he cupped her cheek. She felt like her face was being cut open.

"Lars," she said, and went light-headed.

"You can call me anything you want."

"Lars."

"Sure." He smiled, and she saw the gaps in his teeth, just like always, the swollen gums that bled when he brushed them. He hadn't changed since she stabbed him. She was glad he followed her into the city.

"I found you face-down on the train tracks," he said.

Joanna only remembered walking. Emerging into a place where the sidewalks were shattered and jagged and irregular. She used them, in any case, stopped following the train tracks when she saw the beginning of the sidewalk, passed a shack in the hazy, permanent twilight that

rested in the center of a plot of grass—the only grass she would see in all her years in the city. She passed it by without a second look that day, turned instead to watch the train pass behind her as she heard the squealing of the brakes, the electric horn. As it picked up speed again, the electric thrum pressured her head from the inside. As it pulled away and she watched its headlight burrow through the twilit haze, as she watched the taillights streak away and let the darkness flood back. This air, this murky light, needed room to breathe. The streetlamps colored everything a dull yellow, like dried urine.

She had walked for a long time, measuring her steps carefully. The sidewalk was treacherous. A nose-breaking, bone-breaking kind of treacherous. When she stumbled, she decided to crawl on all fours just to be safe.

Few cars passed her by. But she heard trains, always, saw the edges and shadows of their lights when she didn't see them directly. The trains' lights made the crumbling houses lining the streets look like they were under siege.

She walked all night, or all day—she didn't know how to tell; she couldn't see the sun; Carriage Town was always the same dull electric yellow, broken only by the passing trains or—rare—cars. But the roads were safe. She could have walked on the road. It wasn't much better than the sidewalk along Carriage Town's periphery, but it might have been enough.

She switched to the train tracks when she came across a place where three of them intersected. There was a house nearby. She stood in the gravel, between the tracks, and listened.

The last thing she remembered was her shadow elongating in front of her. For some reason, her thought then had been that she must be getting taller, growing then and there, if only for having entered the city she'd looked upon from afar.

Lars's hand felt like a cheese grater against her face.

“I think I love you,” he said. His eyes had a watery tenderness about them. She was laying down, she realized, and he was standing above her.

It was then that the rest of the room began to come into relief: it felt cramped only because of its size—all that was there was the two of them and the bed upon which she lay. It was too soft; she felt like she was sinking—moreover, it was not a foreign feeling. She tried to remember where she felt it before, and failed. She watched—and heard—another train pass by the window, the light etching their shadows against the walls. There were curtains, and they were within reach, but she didn’t close them. She thought to close the window because of the noise, the horns and the brakes and the thrum, but when she reached her hand out, her fingertips bumped against glass. The window was closed, and would stay that way.

“Stay here with me.” His voice was pleading. She thought: Lars would not plead. Lars would demand. Lars would take. And she would like that. Either her eyes or her ears were not working properly—but she had looked into these same eyes before, heard this same voice. Had spent what seemed like a long time looking into his eyes.

This was a question of proportion, of course: he loomed large over the beginnings of her consciousness. She was not curious about what happened before, if anything happened before. She was happy to let Lars declare her age. (He had told her, when they met, “You look about twenty.”) How old was she now? She had no conception of time, and it didn’t matter—Lars would tell her if she got any older. She, more than anything, wanted to forget life pre-Lars, let her hands slicked with his blood be the starting point, the weight of the knife be the beginning, and the resistance of his skin—the little pop it made when the knife broke through—be the foundation she felt it was.

She looked up into his eyes, the disheveled red hair, the fiery stubble, the bloodstain on his shirt—it was either a mark of his stubbornness or of her capacity for hallucination or both, and she sat up and smiled, said, “Do you remember when we met?”

“I remember when I found you outside. By the tracks.” He was hesitant. Lars had not been hesitant.

“And that was how we met?”

“Well,” he said, looking at his feet, “You only just woke up.”

“And that’s how we met?”

“Yeah.”

“Nothing before that?”

“How could there be?” He looked confused. Lars was not one to be confused. But this was Lars, she had no doubt. So she tried to forget everything before waking up in that bed, looking up at that face and bloodied chest, at Lars. It was new and it was old and it was, somehow, all she wanted.

She said, “What’s my name?”

“I don’t know your name.”

“Yes, you do.”

“I’m Michael,” he said.

“You’re Lars. Your name has always been Lars.”

He laughed nervously, a slight titter.

She sat up and leaned in close, felt his quickened breath, said, “And my name?”

“I bet you have a pretty name,” he said. He seemed to think she might disappear if she moved.

“So?”

And so he had told her she was Joanna. She went about forgetting her previous name, whatever it had been. She kissed him and then she lay down again, touched her fingers to the window, looked outside to the air thick with smoke. And when she saw he would not leave her be, she told him she would stay. Which had been her intention since she opened her eyes. To stay.

He leaned over her. And she felt her arm slip around his neck, pulling him down, pulling him in.

#

It had started to rain, drops streaking blind at the window in the same tired pattern, staccato surprise from above, from the dark. The only way to forecast the weather in Carriage Town was to wait for it. The rain would sting your eyes and, on bad days, your skin, and it would give the dark, smoky sky the slicked-back quality it needed to feel natural, make you feel a little better about being cowed by it. The petrochemical smell of the rain made the world seem as if it would burst into flame.

They could smell it inside the house.

Jack had nestled himself on Michael's other side. He had clearly wanted to be against Liss. So he sat on Michael's other side, set his head on Michael's shoulder the same way Michael had done to him earlier that day, between the train tracks. He had changed clothes when he was upstairs—nice shirt, nice pants, fit like they were made just for him. He had showered, too; Michael had never smelled the two of them so clean before, and it made him self-conscious.

Michael said, “You should get ready. We should go soon, right?”

“No,” said Jack. “We have time. Really.”

“And if someone comes home?”

“They’re dead, Michael.” He could feel Jack stretch against him, felt the necklace in Jack’s hair brush his neck. Jack’s head seemed strangely heavy, and Michael’s shoulder began to feel sore. Liss was asleep on his other shoulder. He felt like a poorly poured foundation. He looked at the goose pimples writing in Braille across Jack’s arms. It was cold.

Jack said, “There’s a car in the garage. I have the keys. We don’t even need to bother with the trains anymore. We can at least wait until the weather gets better.” A smile, stretched smoothly, teeth surprisingly bright; Michael could feel Jack’s mouth stretch against his shoulder. “Let’s just rest for a while, yeah? We hardly ever get to do this.

“I’ll tell you a story,” he said, “and maybe that’ll help you calm down.

“When I was five or six, I found an old couch in an alleyway. It was a nasty brown color with little spots of mold all over it. There were sharp springs sticking out of places where there shouldn’t have been springs. It was a real dangerous couch. But it was mine, is what was important: I was pretty sure that nobody else had found it. It was so close to home that I figured people would stay away.”

Jack placed a hand on Michael’s thigh, dug in lightly with his nails.

“Every chance I got, I would sit on it. I would go to it and I would very carefully squeeze in between the springs that were sticking and I would just sit there, breathing the mold. Whenever I sat down, it made a sound like a sponge and I got wet. I don’t remember it raining a lot, but I guess it was enough. And I would just sit until I got hungry and went home, and I’d do it day after day

He sighed. “And that’s it, I guess. Not much of a story.” And Jack closed his eyes, and his breathing softened.

And Michael sat up, awake, eyes at the window, watching the wet swirl the ever-present dark, hearing the rain hiss against the window, thinking that, yes, Jack was right and they should rest and wait and relax for a time, thinking that, yes, Jack tended to be right, that he couldn't at the time think of an instance of Jack acting against their best interests. He looked silly, with his blocky tattoos, his children's drawings, his slack jaw, but he was smarter than Michael had ever given him credit for. Michael had always just assumed that since Jack had known a real kind of wealth, that any kind of wisdom or preservational impulse beyond seeking company was beyond him. Jack had very much been in charge of him since they met, and he realized then that it was for the better.

There was a flash of lighting outside; in Carriage Town, it only made the smoke overhead seem closer, like it was ready to move in. Michael felt like a collar was being tightened around his neck.

Michael, shifting his weight, pulled his arm free, wrapped it around Jack's shoulder. Why not? He figured he should get close to him. Always, his affection had been directed toward Liss. But this was someone who had acted in his best interest, even when it seemed otherwise, one of two people who took him in, insofar as they could, when he was alone. And Michael had been focused on the subtle signs of what he assumed was abuse, and focused even more on exploiting those signs to fuck Liss whenever he could.

Sex was the focus; he didn't feel guilty about that. But he felt as though he had wronged Jack. Jack, whose skin gave away the fact that he was cold, whose breathing was gentle now, whose tattoos made him think of the one time he drew on his bedroom walls.

It was when his mother had first left him at home without her. She had lived off his father's money, she told him, which was only fair since his father hadn't wanted to keep him

around. She eventually had to return to the factory and ask for a job, and she was unceremoniously given one. That's how it always worked, she had told him: there were always bodies that needed to be replaced. She had brought Michael to the interview, held his hand all the way there, all through the interview, and especially hard on the way home. She had been told that she couldn't bring her son to work with her, and she was terrified then of losing him. A fear that had lain dormant precisely because she hadn't had to be away from him for any significant period of time since his birth, and she was certain in her core that something terrible would happen were she to leave him. Her first day back, she kept him locked in his bedroom, with a single latch and a single heavy padlock. She left him with all his usual toys, stuffed animals and action figures and some crayons and colored pencils and paper. So she left him there, thought about him all day, came home and unlocked the door with shaking hands, like there was a bomb on the other side of the door, or like she was unwrapping a present from a new lover. The walls were covered. He drew a little red wagon hemorrhaging its scribbled contents around the room, shaded the highest areas he could reach in black, pitch like the sky outside, the area above the same beige as the other walls. It looked like his scene was underground, a scene sunk below dirt and stone, like the world had imploded on itself, a kind of reverse shedding of its skin. But what struck her that day was the fact that the wagon's wheels were much larger than the wagon itself, and that the sidewalk upon which it was pulled (by a figure labeled "Mom" who held hands with a smaller figure, smiles on their faces) was jagged, plateaus jutting upward like a dud bomb had landed on it and split the concrete upward—the largest of these was immediately in front of the figures and their wagon. But they were everywhere, and on the opposite wall there was a strip of train tracks with gaps between the railroad ties, and a house nearby, and a train that was misaligned with the tracks. And she knew then that she had to do more. She embraced her son.

She held his hand all the way to the hardware store a few blocks away, and didn't let it go on the way back, the bag in her other hand laden with heavy padlocks and latches and a set of specialty hinges that locked independently. Michael was happy to have shown his drawings to his mother.

#

Lars put her to work once she had her bearings. At first he was all smiles and tours, showing her around by train and by foot, cooking for her, teaching her how to get around and how things in Carriage Town functioned. The little house in the middle of the train junction began to feel like home, and Joanna quickly grew comfortable there.

He would wait on her, would Lars. Lars had changed, become overly considerate, timid. Lars would no sooner try to fuck her than he would entertain the idea of having a child, and he would not entertain that idea. Joanna took all the initiative, straddled him and held him down by the wrists and watched his eyes grow wide, like they would burst and blind him, staying like that when she fucked him and fucked him and fucked him.

It took her time to get to that point. She was so timid when she woke up in that bed, recognizing the face above her and mystified by the trains and the fog outside the window. Nothing was clear in Carriage Town, but it was always less so to Joanna. Always. She never achieved what anyone—herself included, especially herself—would call an accurate perspective, a balanced view of the world. There was always what she did understand in opposition to what she didn't, like a rabbit's eyes: unable to see each other, despite being a part of the same thing.

And so because she was unable any longer to understand Lars, to process his timidity, she became what he had been: she took what she wanted from him, and what she wanted was sex and, by way of sex, a son. She was willing to murder any number of girl-children that came out of her henceforth, so long as she would eventually create a son. A son to counter the daughter

she had lost, the one that lodged herself in her mind crazily from the second morning she woke up next to Lars in his house in the train junction. A daughter. A son. A son.

Lars worked, as most everyone in Carriage Town did, for the factory. Every morning—and sometimes at night—he would descend into a tunnel, one entrance to which was just behind their house, by the tracks, and he would walk the length of the city on some days, not coming home until very late, or very early. It was his job to keep the sewers in check, to fix problems as they arose, to keep problems from arising. He was a glorified maintenance man who carried a pistol.

Joanna asked him, her second morning in Carriage Town, “You don’t do it alone, do you?” He had just explained to her that he needed to work, that he would be gone for much of the day, that there was some minor flooding on Carriage Town’s east side. She was sitting at the little table that took up most of the little kitchen.

“There are people all over,” he said.

“People with tunnels behind their houses?”

“People with tunnels behind their houses, yes. Some with tunnels *in* their houses. Some who have cots in little rooms underground, and some who’re kept there against their will and forced to work the sewers.” And, in response to the quizzical look on her face, “That’s why you don’t break the law here.” He heaved a sigh and began, “Just—“ and his voice broke, and he said, finally, after swallowing hard, Adam’s apple bobbing like a cartoon, “Just don’t go outside, remember.”

Joanna had hardly heard anything he said that didn’t involve tunnels. She was mesmerized by the wet spot on his shirt, the crusty red of it, wishing she still had that knife. Where had he put it, she wondered? It would make sense for him to get rid of the weapon she

used to kill him—was this a sign of distrust, she wondered, though they dwelt beneath the same roof? Was this a sign, finally, that she had nothing left?

She said, “How did you survive?” She leaned forward and reached out slow and touched his chest, didn’t feel what she saw: her fingertips were dry. And she only realized when she touched him that he had changed his clothes, that he was wearing the rough orange jumpsuit he used to crawl around underground. She no longer saw the stain. How had it failed to register, the absence of the stain? The change in clothes? The bright orange?

“What?” He took her hand in his, cradling it, stroking the top with the other hand. He kneeled down, looked her in the eyes.

“I killed you.”

“We’ve only just met.” His brow was furrowed. “We met yesterday.”

The far-off look in Joanna’s eyes receded, itself became far-off, and she shook her head and felt her stringy hair whip her cheeks and said, “No, I get it. Yes. I’m grateful.”

“I need to go to work,” he said, standing, keeping her hand in his, looking down now, looking as though he were afraid to leave.

“You can get anywhere from the tunnels?” Looking up at him, blue eyes big in her skull. “Anywhere from here?”

Letting go of her hand, letting it drop, limp, to her side, “Yes.”

“You can go to the factory?”

“Yes.”

“How far out do the tunnels go?”

“Out?”

“Do they go outside the city?”

“I have to go,” he said, and he put each hand on each of her temples, leaned down while he pulled her up, and kissed her on the forehead. The lifting, the pressure it mounted in her neck, stung her shoulder; she thought she felt the scab pop a little, thought she felt fresh pus binding her shirt to her shoulder. It thrilled her, this new feeling, the teethmarks reasserting themselves when his lips touched her forehead.

He told her he loved her and she watched him recede. It wasn't far away, but she told herself it was, told herself that he was growing smaller, readying himself to disappear into the horizon as he walked toward the door. And then he left and closed the door behind him. She thought it odd that there was a keyhole on the inside.

The lock clicked from outside. Lars was gone for the day.

#

Liss was gone when Michael awoke, and Jack's head was in his lap. He had an erection that was jutting against Jack's ear. He looked at the crude tattoo of a robot on Jack's neck, all sharp angles and oversized bolts, and realized when he shifted his weight that Jack was awake, that Jack was looking up at him and smiling like a dog who had just eaten a pile of shit.

He said, “Thinking about me?” and laughed.

Michael pulled himself free and stood, stretched, grunting. His limbs were stiff. His back hurt. He heard the vague sound of water moving through pipes, heard the refrigerator in the next room start running.

Jack said, “Too easy, I know, right?” He was sitting up now, shirtless. His skin was bright enough, Michael thought, to hurt his eyes in the right light. He looked a like a finished coloring book.

Michael moved to the kitchen, conscious for the first time in years of his smell. A smell of far-away rotting and sweat. The house was clean. Cleaner than any place he had lived. The only dirt he saw was what they had tracked in on the too-white carpet, their footprints like little islands. He had grime under his fingernails. How did he get grime under his fingernails, he wondered? He had just showered the day before. He should not be so dirty. He pressed his hands flat against the black marble countertop. It was still raining outside, still pattering against the window, still smelling like gas. He couldn't see anything outside. Too dark. He didn't know what time it was. He was leaning into the counter. His fingernails were tar-colored. He wasn't sure if it was grime or blood or both under his fingernails. He couldn't tell. He didn't know what dirt felt like versus what blood felt like there. But he knew he shouldn't be so dirty, either way. He should have washed himself off. He could see his reflection in the countertop: it looked like he had been shaving with a dull knife because he had been shaving with a dull knife; it was what they had. Patches of hair stuck out at odd angles on his face; his forehead and the corners of his eyes had small wrinkles. But all he could focus on was the glaring light overhead, which, in the countertop, looked like a burning star over his shoulder, or what he imagined a star looked like. He only knew what Jack had told him about them. Jack had said that stars were like little suns.

Jack said, "Okay?" and Michael turned and leaned against the countertop.

Among other things, there were tattoos of trains and train tracks (separately), robots and cars and disembodied wheels and disembodied bodies and limbs and whole people and partial people, meandering lines that didn't seem to be drawing anything, or were aborted drawings; there were naked women and naked men and people fucking people and people fucking objects and people fucking nothing (Michael suspected these were incomplete)—all rendered in the same blocky style, all looking like they were drawn by a child who couldn't color inside the

lines. Michael thought for a moment that Jack could mean anything, could stand for anything just by virtue of being covered with drawings, but just as quickly thought the opposite. Jack confused him.

Jack, leaning in: “Are you okay?” Michael could see the age in his face, the creases that would become wrinkles, and it hurt him a little to notice that. Jack seemed worried, his mouth a loose little frown, his eyes soft, and he leaned very, very close, so that Michael could smell the mouthwash on his breath, which he found strangely unappealing, if only because it was so unusual.

Jack said, “You seem off.”

Michael was looking past Jack’s head, at Liss walking naked through the other room, at the darkened window behind her, at the wet footprints in her wake, at her stringy-wet hair, and the overlarge clothes that she was slipping into.

Jack turned to look, and then smiled at Michael, the same shit-eating grin. “Maybe a shower, eh? We should leave tomorrow.”

Michael felt dizzy. But he nodded and he followed Jack up the stairs, gripping the banister hard enough to redden his knuckles, and when Michael left him alone he started the shower and the world started to heave and heave until Michael couldn’t take it anymore and dropped onto the bathtub beneath his feet, his forehead hitting the rim, the water getting suddenly cold.

#

When it rained, Carriage Town seemed to be weeping, and the tears were running down its body and burning its face. The aggregate smog and smoke was monolithic enough to be a deity, the yellow streetlamps below the constellations it surveys, and the city its droppings.

Residents did not consciously think of things this way; residents of Carriage Town deified the factory, the city center, the source of the city's prosperity and its darkness. But the factory's by-products were much more pervasive and influential.

But the factory, with its twinkling multi-colored lights lining the roof (and said to have once told the weather by their color, but became, as far as anyone could tell, random) was much more relatable.

#

And why did he treat her so delicately? He acted like Joanna was sick. Never mind that Lars kept her locked in while he was away—that was fine, of course, a sign that he loved her, that he wanted to keep her for himself, which made her feel loved—but it was the doting, at first so affectionate, so happy to have found her, but gradually taking on shades of concern until all the affection was marked over with worry. She did not want him to worry about her. She would worry for him. She felt she could excel at worry. At present, the relationship felt unbalanced, him all smiles all the time, thin as they were, and cooking for her and always asking dripily, “Are you okay?” and “How are you feeling?” This was not the man Joanna had killed, not the man she ran away with, not the man she loved despite herself, not the man she ran away from nor the man who followed her.

And yet he was. He looked just like all of them, which made him all of them. Of course. She was not confused.

His doting made her want to get out. Alone, it was fine, as was his locking her in the house when he was gone, taking her outside only when he could hold her by the wrist at all time—these behaviors together, though, created in her a sense of unease and wanderlust and

loneliness. He was not really there when he was there: he was only a smile and a hollow phrase, a mere presence.

She needed a son—she still felt the absence of one to be an imbalance etched into her biology. She must have a son. She said to Lars, almost every day: we will have a son; every day, Lars smiled at this and submitted when she forced his clothes off and they fucked. He was developing welts around his wrists, belting in the small scabs from her fingernails. He would relent on this. But eventually, some four weeks after he had taken her in, he failed to show up at all for an entire day, and then two, and then three. She figured it was work-related, knew the sludge that would sporadically bubble up from all the drains in the house were symptomatic of that.

It was not an issue of hunger that led her to break their bedroom window—she knew little about cooking, true, but she cobbled together meals that were edible enough from the fridge and the pantry. It was not an issue of her libido, for the sex was only pleasing to her insofar as it could be a means to an end, and that end didn't seem like it would come about. She wondered if Lars had gone impotent, wondered if there would simply be nothing she could do to him to get what she wanted—but this ran so contrary to the Lars that had taken her whenever he wanted that she couldn't entertain it for very long; the idea itself was just too jarring and contradictory in the jumble of identities clumped under one name in her head. There was simply no room in her brain to entertain the idea of his impotence.

Rather, it was loneliness that propelled her hand through the bedroom window. Her fist came back to her slick and red-streaked; she had put her arm through to the elbow and pulled it back as fast it had gone through; blood beaded up in trails up and down her forearm, and she picked shards out of the ditches between her knuckles. She had kept her thumb inside her fist,

and it felt like she had tried to break it with a hammer, but only came close, not bringing it down hard or fast enough; the pain in her thumb was worse than anywhere else. She had not intended to hurt herself, but she let the arm drip, let the spots of red sprinkle the carpet, brush against her clothes.

A moment before, she had been looking out the window, watching the trains go by. It was how she had learned to keep track of time, by the frequency of the trains. She could hear them and feel the rumble of them rattle the house, but the trains never quite seemed real unless she saw them. So she watched their lights burrow through the darkness and fog, and she listened for their whistles, and she watched the people on the boarding platform just outside until a train pulled up and obscured her view. People on the platform would sit on the ground when the benches were full (and the benches were always full, transients using them as beds), and Joanna liked to watch them all stand up when they saw or heard an incoming train, getting up as quickly possible, some wiping real or imagined dust off of their clothes and others knowing that it didn't matter. All the trains went either to or from the factory, veins coursing through Carriage Town, enough train lines to get anyone close enough to walk to anything.

But that day, before she shuttled her arm through the window, she saw a little boy: he was maybe five years old, and alone, all curls and unselfconsciousness, and the other people on the platform eyed him leerily, as though they wanted to kick him or toss him onto the tracks; and it was when one of the transients stirred on his bench, threw off the old coat he had been using as a blanket—before he threw it off, he looked a like a carcass, like a dead deer had been sleeping on the bench. The boy was frightened.

And that was when the train had pulled up. When it left, the transient and the child were the only ones on the platform, child wrist-gripped and looking like he would scream. It was when the man pulled the boy out of her view that she sent her hand through the window.

She was not punching anything at all—rather, she was reaching toward the child, hoping to pluck him from the platform, so that she wouldn't have to feel lonely and he wouldn't have to hold back his screams. She could keep him safe from strangers. And so as she watched the two figures receded, off the platform, just beginning to navigate the jagged sidewalks. Then she ran to the kitchen and retrieved the broom, cleared the remaining glass from the window as best she could before climbing through, then falling out, the glass she missed slicing shallowly into her stomach. She was wearing a floral print dress because Lars liked it, thought it was exotic, the flowers, and now the stomach had three parallel tears like she had been slashed by a wild animal.

Her belly pooled red and the fabric turned sticky and gleaming.

And she was on her feet, then, spewing gravel underfoot, and she was running in a way she didn't think possible, running that fast, climbing from the tracks to the platform and then jumping down the stairs on the other side, just picking up speed again as her foot caught jagged concrete and she tumbled downward, arms catching stone, head hitting concrete. This was worth it if she could get the child. She thought it to herself as a litany: *worth it, worth it, worth it*. The side of her head was wet and dripping, and she couldn't tell cuts from severe scrapes on her arm, so ground-up was her skin, so profusely bleeding—her arm looked like a hunk of freshly cut meat.

She righted herself, noted the man and the boy stepping gingerly along the sidewalk, heading into areas darker and more treacherous, heading toward the city's edge.

Joanna followed, stepping just as gingerly. The road wasn't any better than the sidewalk here; the one car that passed her bottomed out, metal underside screeching against the edges of an asphalt crater. A train flashed by, screaming, lighting up her periphery for a moment.

She walked, kept sight of them, hazy in the distance. Either they were silent or hushed enough to remain unheard under the ambient buzzing of the streetlamps, the light from which had taken on a fizzy quality this far out, like television static. Everything felt insubstantial. Joanna felt blood run along individual strands of her hair, dripping onto her shoulder. She was sure she looked a mess, and she only cared about how she looked insofar as she could potentially scare the boy away. That mustn't happen; he must come home with her. She had felt some vague disaster looming over her in the days she had spent isolated, and she felt that a boy—now *this* boy, since she had seen him, since it had become her mission to rescue him—would be her vaccine against the encroaching ominousness, vague and cloudy as it was in the back of her mind.

She felt as though she was walking for days; progress was slow, if she wanted to avoid falling again, and it was slow for her prey as well—she would have again attempted to run had she lost sight of them. The houses here were largely glorified lean-tos. Smoke came out of the tops of the nicer ones, only a shade darker than the ambient air. These were the houses with walls of corrugated iron. Elsewhere, barrel fires, people huddled around them. Alleyways between what looked like once- buildings, now doorless and hollowed out and full of people wearing coats filthy enough to be mistaken for hides; she couldn't always see them, but she knew they were there, always, watching—whenever she caught a glint at the corner of her vision, she assumed it was the light catching someone's eyes, betraying them by making them gleam. She wanted Lars.

But, she thought to herself, despite herself, despite the hitherto single-mindedness of her pursuit: why is this area so destitute? She had watched the city grow on the horizon for many days, blot out the sunset more and more with each expansion, until darkness came too early to the surrounding countryside. This place—this place nearer the edge—should be a new development. It was only logical. And she was so caught up in what struck her as something so nonsensical that she couldn't even begin to fathom it that she had stopped watching the figures ahead of her—and when she started walking again, she stopped again immediately, having realized that there were no longer the two figures tip-toeing over the rubble of the sidewalk ahead of her. They were gone, and, further, the sidewalk ended right at the tips of her feet.

And there was grass past the tips of her feet. Sparse, fragile grass.

And a small house. Lights shone through the only two windows. It looked like it had only one room. Joanna looked behind her: barrel fires, dilapidated buildings, lean-tos. In front of her: a small house, intact, and grass. She hadn't been in Carriage Town for very long, but grass was already a distant memory.

A train screamed by, whisking her hair around her face; strands from the right side of her head stuck to the bloody ones on her left. The train had briefly flood-lit a platform just beyond the grass. She brushed her hair aside with her right hand, forgetting all the blood—it would hold, anyway, and wouldn't get in her face again. Still, the sight of her damaged hand had startled her, dry and crusty in places, oozing and wet in others, red and white and black, splotchy like rotting meat. She was dizzy.

She went toward the house, felt dizzier.

She leaned against the door with her forehead.

She knocked and felt the vibration of her damaged hand against the door. It irritated the cut on her head. She felt dizzier.

She lifted her head and pounded as hard as she could, blood flakes sprinkling from her arm, arm and hand bleeding anew and leaving the curled *o* of the bottom of her fist duplicated all over the door.

She screamed, “The boy!”

Which turned into, “Give me the boy!”

Which turned into, “My son!”

Which turned into, “My only son!”

And she crumpled knees-first before the door, bloody fingers dragged down the door, sobbing by then, letting her head hit against it again and again until she let go completely and screamed something she couldn’t understand.

Eventually, the screaming resolved into a low keen, and that into a huddled silence. And when finally she lifted her head and looked behind her, there were the transient and the child ascending the train platform; the air around them murky.

She smelled ginger. It was her son.

She ran, ascended the platform at full speed without falling, found the man and the boy sitting at the opposite edge, backs to her, looking into the darkness beyond the train tracks. She could see that they both had red hair, man and child; and when she put the flat of her foot against the man’s back to try and kick him off the platform, he pushed himself backwards and Joanna’s back hit concrete. The curved edge of her spine hit first, sending a shockwave through her body, and she cried out. And the man was above her then, a younger Lars: pubescent carrot-colored mustache, too-wide grin, overpowering ginger smell, and that laugh, the same laugh he so rarely

showed her. His hair was dirty and caked to the sides of his head and there were holes in his shirt that looked like they were from the tips of cigarettes. She imagined him on fire: she wondered if his hair would contrast with the flames or if it would blend in—somehow, she couldn't imagine his hair burning. It was the thing she remembered, that hair thrust into her face when she dug the knife into his chest, when his head fell forward. It was his hair that had brushed her face then.

But this young Lars, standing over her, blurred through the tears in her eyes, simply said, "You can have him," and half turned, then turned back and said, "For now," and then he was out of the frame of her vision. She heard a few quick steps on the platform before a scattering of gravel and then she heard him no more.

She said, "Son?" Her voice wavered. "I need your help." She could feel her nose crinkling and she was trying her best not to sob.

The scrape of shoes, of the child standing up.

Joanna could not move—or so she told herself. Isolated in her field of vision was the sky, dark and roiling, alive with shadows and the effort of blotting out the sun. The lamplight in her periphery accentuated the density of the shadows above, the low murkiness all around. The air looked thick, better for swimming than breathing.

She heard the electronic train whistle, watched the light dissolve everything above her, and then stop at the platform. Nobody got on, nobody got off, and as the train was pulling away the boy stepped into her sight, looking down at her, into her eyes.

He looked like an even younger Lars, a Lars of five or six. Lars reduced to caricature, shrunk to child size. She imagined this boy's personality would be identical. She imagined this boy was the same person. She imagined the past was standing over her, and she imagined the past was hers.

She said, “Are you okay?” and he said nothing. She had tried to sound concerned and hoped she came across that way. She had thought that motherhood would be instinctual for her, but she realized very quickly that she had been wrong. She had had a child before, but she had never loved a child before, and already she loved this boy. She said, “You’re safe now,” and he said nothing. She wondered if her concern came across as plastic, given how hard she was trying. She didn’t want for him to get the wrong idea. That she cared deeply about him was the right idea. That she would make him her life was the right idea. His lips were pursed and he looked like he was looking past her.

She briefly wondered if there was something on the ground before groaning with the effort of sitting up. Her spine felt spongy, and she tried to push the colors that exploded in front of her vision off to the side. They were getting in the way of the boy’s face, was the main thing, his little red-haired familiar face. She touched the palm of her ruined hand to his chest, felt how solid and real and alive he was, and the colors retreated to the periphery, the pain not receding but becoming, very suddenly, secondary. He didn’t move away from her—she liked that. The boy wasn’t excitable. Her son couldn’t be excitable. Their eyes were level with each other’s when she was sitting on the ground, but he would not look into hers. It would happen, she told herself, because it must happen eventually. The boy must look into his mother’s eyes.

“Lars,” she said. “Your name is Lars.”

“Okay.” His lips crackled quietly when he moved them, dry from disuse; the point where his lips met was pasted in white, dry skin clinging to dry skin, wettened by saliva and exposed to the air when he spoke. His voice had a *creak* to it. He sounded like an adult. A tired adult with a dull voice.

Joanna said, “You’re five years old?” She could tell that the cuts in her hand had stopped bleeding, could tell the blood was dry and scabbing over. Her hand was sticking ever so slightly to the boy’s shirt. Not that she was pulling her hand away—quite the opposite. She was relishing the feeling of his lungs filling and emptying, and she told herself she could feel, against her hand and radiating through the rest of her body, the muffled beating of his heart. If anything, she was pressing into him more than she was holding it there, the child not moving away out of mercy or pity or love or all of those things.

“Okay.”

“Well,” she said, pulling her hand finally and reluctantly from his chest. She let the word dissolve into the air. When she stood, the boy dropped into shadow; she was standing over him, in front of the streetlamp. She could see where her hand had been, though, blood flaked print on his chest, flecks drifting off when he shifted his weight. She took his hand in her other hand, said, “Well, we better get home,” and he said nothing in response.

She didn’t ask about the man he had been with. She knew who he was.

They walked home slowly, and without incident, she leading him gingerly over the sidewalks, he flooding her nostrils with ginger just as she knew he would, the trains flashing by intermittently and punctuating their progress with whistles. She told the boy that his father would take him exploring just as he had taken her, and that that mother and son would keep each other company during the day, until it was time for school, when she would take him there and bring him home personally. She told him that he would never be alone, that she would always be there, always looking out for him. She did not mean this in a metaphysical sense—she took all of her motherly duties literally.

Eventually, they came to a point where they could see the train platform, and, beyond, the house in the junction.

“That’s home,” she said, pointing with the damaged hand (leaking trace amounts of pus now, shiny and caked red like a newborn), still holding his hand with the other.

“We started here,” a scratch in his throat, which worried Joanna—what if he was sick? She couldn’t let him get sick.

“Past the platform,” she said. “The house.

Three breath’s hesitation, then, “Okay.”

Joanna had to knock on the door. She didn’t have a key. Lars opened it—home, he was home!—and looked ready to scream, looked ready to hit her, to throw her to the ground and stomp on her until she could run no longer. But he saw the child, and restrained himself—or, no, maybe didn’t restrain himself, maybe became too angry to speak, and he looked at the boy and then at Joanna, then at the boy and then at Joanna.

She said, “We have a son.” She had intended for the proclamation to be gentle, happy, a memorable moment between the three of them. She must have delivered the words wrong, because his mouth opened and closed, jaw working, and then he turned around and went into the bedroom. She could hear glass crunching underfoot. She closed the front door and followed, child in tow.

When he saw, he said, “Leave him in the other room.”

“He’s our son,” she said.

“No,” said Lars. “Where did he come from?” He was wearing his orange jumpsuit, and he smelled like a toilet.

“You were gone,” she said.

“You broke the window.”

“I missed you.”

“Are you unable to take care of yourself at all?” And he let out an inarticulate half-grunt-half-scream and kicked a hole into the wall just under the window.

“I’ve wanted a son.”

He huffed, “I’ve noticed.” He sighed as loud as he seemed able.

She said, gesturing with her head, “He looks like you. He looks just like you.”

Lars was breathing in her face before she finished speaking

“No,” he said, breath hot and sweet and muggy, “No. He doesn’t. Did you even look at the kid?” Raising his voice, “Did you look at him? Before you? Before you—“

“I saved him.”

“No.”

“I watched him get abducted.”

“No.”

“By a young you.”

“Look,” he said. His forehead was resting against hers, a hand on each of her shoulders; it was a posture he slipped into when he was worried about her, done after looking for a hard moment at her ruined hand, all crust and pus and shine. Joanna’s arm looked as fresh-grown as ruined, like a new, decimated limb. “Look,” he said. She could feel his forehead crinkle against hers. She thought him on the verge of an embrace, ready to accept the boy’s place with her. “But look,” he said, worked his hands up slowly, paused with his palms on the sides of her neck; it felt tender. His touch was light. But then, all at once, his hands gripped her temples—dried blood abraded and fluttering to the floor—and he pressed hard, gripped her head like a melon he was

going to smash on the ground. His eyes were shivering, darting, his teeth were gritted. He said, “Look—

“Look. At. Him.”

And with a sudden jerk of his hands she was staring at the boy, his tiny hand enclosed in hers, barely larger. She said, “He’s not Lars?” She couldn’t move her head. Her eyes began to water.

“There is no Lars,” he said. He seemed ready to overflow.

“Lars?”

“*I’m* not Lars. I don’t know a Lars.”

The boy’s features had begun to resolve into something different, shapes and colors rearranging themselves in front of her eyes. The boy was raggedy, scrawny, had messy, caked hair. She couldn’t tell if it was naturally dark or if it was saturated with grime, or both. He looked sickly. He had not looked sickly when she met him. He had looked healthy like his father. His father was Lars. This was an immutable truth that would not be shaken. It was a foundation. It was a rock. Lars.

“What’s his name, then?” On this she would relent.

“*My* name’s Michael. Michael.” Lars shook her, once, hard, so that her spine seemed to shift out of place. He spelled his name aloud, giving her head a jerk with each letter. Then he held her still, drilled into her eyes with own bulged and ready to leap out.

“His name is Michael,” she said.

He kept his eyes on hers, said, “No. What’s your name?” He had meant to look to the child, but hadn’t moved.

“Michael,” the child said.

Sides had been picked.

Lars threw Joanna's head at the wall, and it bounced off like stone against concrete, the sound dull save for the give in the drywall, a proto-crater in the shape of her head. She managed to pull the boy close so his head hit her stomach rather than the wall, setting her midsection aflame. There was still glass there, she could tell, and she hoped—hoped as hard as she could—that none of the slivers of glass in her belly had touched the child's face.

That was when Lars tried to separate the boy's hand from Joanna's, said, "We need to get him home."

The fire against her belly was nothing.

Michael's neck was open and stretched out beneath her head. He was trying to pry the hands apart. It had come time to protect her child. She attacked with a natural weapon.

Joanna recalled—very distantly in that she didn't know where she had heard it—stories of vampires, things that sucked people's blood through their necks, killed them that way. What Joanna did was nothing like that, is why she thought about it. She sunk her teeth into Lars's neck and she *pulled*. The flesh separated like gossamer. She spit it out and did it twice more. Lars crumpled and she was on him and he gurgled and he died. It all happened much faster than she thought it would. Michael's hand was still in hers, though she held him distantly, her arm stretched as far as it could go, to keep him free of the gore below her and the gore-slick on her face and collar.

She let go of his hand. She felt he was safe then.

Sitting atop Lars's carcass, she surveyed him, her son, already having become a new son, the newest face she had ever seen. This was a beginning. This was *the* beginning.

He was home. The boy was home. Michael was home.

#

“Tell me a story,” people say, more often than not implicitly. They don’t want to ask for a story directly because admitting it outright would imply that they actually want one, or many, and wanting is itself a kind of vulnerability, a kind of loneliness.

Here is a story: someone wants.

Here is a better story: a woman wants a child.

A better story still: a woman wants a child, having run away from the first, having plucked the second off of the streets.

And the woman’s lover, or lovers? The father of her children? The father of her daughter and the father of her son?

Is it possible to be fathered by an absence any more than it’s possible not to be fathered by absence?

Here is a story: a father leaves.

Here is a story: a mother leaves.

Here is a story: one parent kills the other.

Here is a story: one parent kills a delusion.

Here is a story: delusions survive and leap generations.

#

A tall, thin man, hair the color of a rotting orange, matted and messy and dripping, a carrot-colored beard working its way unevenly around his jaw line—when Michael awoke, he was above him, splayed across the rim of the tub, holding himself up with his hands and feet on each side. He was naked, filthy, smelled of ginger and dirt. He dripped; Michael, below, was in about an inch of cold water.

“You remember me?” The man smiled. “You remember me.” His eyes were a milky, clouded white, rolled around in his head, but Michael was sure he was looking him in the eyes. He had a raised, uneven scar across his temple.

“Lars,” said the man. He screamed a stream of syllables that began with the name, and ventured far into gibberish. He was just screaming, his face a foot from Michael’s, overhead.

And just as quickly he settled his voice, and spoke again.

“You don’t say much,” he said, voice creaking like a rusted hinge. “You don’t do much. Worthless. Not like your mother. Your mother was good. Your mother was doing things. Your mother *is* doing things. And you? Being led around in the hope of another fuck, always another fuck. You don’t care about getting out of here; you don’t care about them; you don’t care about your mother; you don’t care about yourself. Just one more fuck is all, right? Yeah? Yeah?”

The mention of his mother unsettled Michael. He was willing to accept the man above him. He raised himself up by his elbows, water rippling around him. He raised his face closer to Lars’s. He hadn’t thought of his mother or of home for a few days. He thought, faced with the man above him, that he had been letting go of home. Maybe he had, maybe he was, maybe he did—this one, he thought, may well be a figment of his imagination. But his smell was overpowering, the smell of the cookies his mother used to make on holidays, and this, more than anything, made Lars unreal.

“You,” said Lars, “are stuck.” He leaned in until their noses were touching. “Your mother’s not stuck. She’s at least moving. She’s been places. Where are you going?” He stretched himself out, raised himself, before pulling his legs in and dropping onto Michael. He grabbed Michael’s wrists and righted himself till he was sitting on Michael’s stomach, holding his wrists over the rim of the bathtub, leaning in, breathing in his face.

Michael couldn't breathe, and he couldn't get his wrists free, and his kneeling Lars's back didn't discourage the man on top of him. Their skin stuck together in places; it was painful when Lars shifted his weight. It was painful when Michael struggled, and so, finally, he stopped, and looked again to the clouded eyes above him. The bathroom was too bright; the walls and floor were white, the lights fluorescent. It felt sterile. He wondered where Jack and Liss were, why they didn't at least knock when Lars had screamed. The house was big, but not so big that a scream wouldn't echo.

And so Michael screamed, until Lars's head collided roughly with his nose and he tasted blood on his lips.

"Quiet," said Lars. "There's a time for that."

Michael was gasping and gurgling.

Lars just said, "Think about it all, yeah?" And he pulled himself out of the tub and walked out of the room, wet footfalls slapping across the floor.

Michael, dazed, lifted himself up and sat on the edge of the tub. It was cold against his body. He leaned down and watched the drops of blood bloom in the water. He held his head in his hands, listened to the drip from his nose for a long moment, and then pulled the stopper. He got out and stuffed his nose with tissue paper until it was no longer running into his mouth, and he stumbled out the door.

There weren't any wet footprints on the carpet.

Michael needed to lay down somewhere. He half-stumbled to the nearest door and opened it, and there was a bed there, yes, but there were clothes and picture albums and picture frames and boxes and toys and games piled haphazardly on it, and all over the floor. It looked

like the closet had thrown up on the room. There were holes in the drywall, exposed wiring and pipes, drywall dust sprinkled like confetti.

Michael's head was burning and his throat tasted of dust and his stomach felt as though it was going to try to escape at any moment, and all he could do, really, was to stumble to the bed and lay atop what appeared to be the least painful to lay atop. There was a muffled crunch of glass when he got on the bed, but he ignored it; what he did not ignore, though, as he was falling asleep, was the framed picture just in front of him, of a blond, long-haired, slack-jawed teenage boy running outside, in the grass, in the sun. The light made his eyes look like stars.

#

Autonomy is the cruelest paradox. The easiest way to explain this is: everyone is a slave to something, often to something of their choosing. And so, a paradox.

What Carriage Town did best was efficiency and autonomy. Workers plugged in to replace the old, the dead, the lost, while the lost remained so, the dead were made to disappear, and the old were, provided they left willingly, allowed to leave. Family members replaced family members. Entire lineages worked a single job, taking over from their fathers or mothers. The process was efficient and elegant and seamless: people needed jobs to make money to live, the elderly and the injured who could no longer work trained their children for their job, and then they died.

As for authority, though—nobody knows, or knew. Carriage Town was the shell of the factory, and the factory was the hub of Carriage Town. They needed each other to exist. But as for the source of either or both, or their symbiosis, who created them, who ruled them—this was impossible to answer. Every authority figure reported to another, every employee of the factory was a subordinate with a superior, a chain of authority maddening in its complexity and

entanglement. It would be easy to accuse everyone of reporting to each other, of subordinating each other, but this idea, often proposed among employees, failed to gain traction—something so huge, so vast, so complete and so *necessary* couldn't possibly be self-sustaining, without a powerful authority directing all, they decided.

CHAPTER III

CRUDE DRAWINGS

Joanna. Joanna had seen ghosts. So many that she had to repeat her name to herself, in her head, to keep from feeling she wasn't real. Joanna.

These are the things she told herself were real about herself. Joanna had hair she thought of as *shit-brown* and eyes that were a not-unattractive shade of green. She had an eight-year-old son who was already almost as tall as her. She worked at the factory in the center of Carriage Town six days a week so she could afford to keep him.

These were the things about her that were real.

Joanna worked. Joanna worked hard, carrying finished parts of machines to where they needed to go to be assembled. Some days she used a cart, some days she would just carry the thing, if possible. Her back was already curving, she was already starting to hunch over. She considered herself a young mother. She never considered why there weren't machines to move the parts.

Joanna had a son named Michael who was home alone on his eighth birthday because she had to work. The factory was wide and deep, but not tall: it stood only two stories above ground, with the rest underneath.

It was like a giant crater in the middle of the city. Joanna felt like a bomb victim.

Today she was carrying a car headliner across the factory floor. She was holding it with both hands against her back, leaning forward and walking as fast as she could. The fiberglass made her itch on her back and on her scalp.

She was thinking about her son. She was worried about her son. She liked to believe that she possessed a kind of mother's intuition about him, that she knew, from afar, when he was hurt or in trouble; but if she were to be honest with herself, she would realize that she just worried constantly, endlessly, the worry-parts of her brain always chittering like a Geiger counter.

During her lunch break that day, she was, as she was every day, approached by a co-worker who asked to borrow a dollar. She was short of what she needed to buy lunch, she said. Like she was every day.

Joanna always turned down these requests, and the co-worker invariably moved on to someone else, again and again until she got what she wanted. Today Joanna said, "It's my son's birthday." She spoke while looking down into the sandwich she brought from home. The bread was a little hard, but still good. She would have to buy new bread soon. She didn't have the energy to run the finances through her head at that moment, to figure how much it would cost and how it would affect her and her son.

But Joanna worried. She was worried now. So much so that she considered leaving early to check on Michael.

But no, she needed the money. They needed the money.

But she still worried.

#

There were two hands on Michael's head, two sets of fingers moving through his hair. They each belonged to a different person; one was larger than the other. He could tell this, wet as his hair was. He enjoyed the scalp massage, the smell of soap above and around him. He was in a half-full tub of warm water, laying back, and he opened his eyes to see Jack and Liss both in nice new clothes, starched shirts and slacks, sleeves rolled up to their elbows.

They both smiled at him. He missed them; it felt like it had been a long, long time. He smiled, and felt self-conscious about it.

Liss asked, “What’d you do?” and, to Michael’s confused look, “Your nose. Your broken nose.”

Said Jack, “I did what I could, alignment-wise. It’ll be a little off, though. Just try not to bump it, yeah?” Michael thought he looked hilarious in formal clothing, crude tattoos jutting out, a blocky rendering of a six-person orgy on his right forearm. They looked like they were trying to escape.

“I think I fell,” said Michael. “I’m sure I fell.” He hardly remembered the encounter, but he was sure they would have said something about Lars. So he fell.

They didn’t stop scrubbing his hair when he opened his eyes. They dunked his head to rinse it, and then they washed the rest of him.

“So we’re gonna leave soon,” said Jack. “Like, once we get you dried and dressed. This place’ll make you crazy—we’ve got to get away.”

Michael didn’t ask if he was talking about the house or the city.

So they finished washing him, and they dried him, and Jack led him to the torn-apart bedroom and told him to take his pick of whatever clothes he could find.

“But,” added Jack, “you already seem to have found your way in here, so you should be quick, yeah?” And when Michael turned around, Jack was gone, and yelled distantly down the hallway, “We’ll be in the garage. Hurry up.”

Michael felt like he had found a family, finally.

Out the window, Michael could actually see the house across the street. The slicked-back darkness of the rainy days gave way to the standard haze of a dry midday, and this filled Michael

with optimism. He found clothes and dressed quickly: a starched white shirt, pressed pants, almost a perfect match to Jack and Liss.

He took the picture of a young Jack in the sunlight and pulled it out of the frame, slipped it in his pocket before heading downstairs. He took the stairs two at a time when he heard an engine start.

#

Joanna knew better. She knew better than to jump to conclusions. What she knew better than that, though, was to leave her son alone on his birthday.

There was guilt, of course. She was exhausted from work, so exhausted that she fell asleep on the train home and overshot her stop. A stupid mistake. She was a bad mother, she told herself. Her house was next to a stop. She waited on a platform too far out with only the buzzing lights and a man who wouldn't stop talking to himself. He smelled rancid, and because he was lying on the only bench, she stood at the edge and yawned and kept her eyes open. The platform was strange, the light hazier than elsewhere, and there was real darkness at the edge of its boundaries—a thing she hadn't seen in three years. It gave her chills. She looked around, and the only thing she could see, across a little dirt road, was a small house with bright lights on the inside. It started to rain softly, a whisper to accompany the homeless man's ramblings. She recognized this platform.

She was leaning forward when she heard the train and had to step back, despite every nerve in her body telling her to pitch herself forward—but no, her son was locked in his room at home on his birthday, and he would want to see her and she would make him dinner and a birthday cake and things would be fine. She was glad the rambling man didn't get on the train, too—it was because of people like him that she was so frightened about letting Michael ride the

train to and from school, and it was only because of her work schedule that she even let him do that, because if she didn't work she couldn't afford her house or food or clothes for her son (and she always bought him the best things even though she couldn't afford it, they couldn't afford it, and her debt was rising at a steady uptick), and without those things they would be evicted and have to live on the streets because Joanna didn't have any friends or family, and she was sure that they would both die if that happened. Michael was the only reason she kept going anymore.

She took a deep breath and leaned back in her seat, and, with difficulty, forced herself to stare out the window. And when her eyes did start to close, which happened before the train started moving again, they opened quickly when the train lurched as if it had hit something on the track large enough to derail it. Everyone on board jolted. But the train kept moving, leaving people to wonder aloud and nobody to give an answer.

She would tell Michael about it when she got home. She would embellish. She liked telling him stories.

Anybody could see Joanna's house from the train platform; it was just across the tracks, and had a yard of gravel. The house shook from its foundation every time a train passed, and bits of plaster had been falling from the ceiling for as long as she'd lived there. The drywall no longer looked like drywall and ceiling had begun to bow. She worried about this aloud whenever she was home and Michael was within earshot.

Michael's window faced the train platform. She would usually see him looking out at her when the train pulled away. He was never actually looking at *her*, but she told herself he was, and it made her happy.

When the train pulled away she saw the broken window.

She thought: it was his father.

And she thought she would have to track him down.

And she thought he would surely die without her.

And she thought.

#

Michael still thought of him, of course: the train, the scent of ginger, and the parting elbow to the head. Lars. Michael knew the exact spot on his temple where Lars's elbow had hit, not by virtue of memory but because there was a tiny bump, like a partially-completed Braille letter, that didn't quite stick out and wasn't differently colored than the rest of his skin. But he felt it when he pressed a finger to the spot, when he ran a finger over his forehead. He could never forget; Lars had left his mark. It was as if he had been branded.

But he didn't feel like anyone's property anymore. He wanted to feel like someone's property. He wanted to be someone's property. Perhaps Lars's, since he hadn't seen his mother in so long.

His mother used to tell him stories about his father. About how his father had rescued her when she was lost, and how sweet and loving he had been. She spoke about him with such reverence save for when she said that he wanted to get rid of Michael—that was why he had to go, she said: because he wanted to abandon his son. *Her* son. She would hold him tight whenever she said it. Her son. She would make Michael feel like he might pop. She would always follow this by telling him not to hate his father. He did a bad thing, but he was sweet, she said. She didn't want Michael hating anyone, she said. She wanted Michael to be a sweet little boy, she said. He knew his father's name was Lars, and he had watched his mother tear his throat out with her teeth, watched her—mouth red, waist-length sheet of blood down the collar of her shirt—

pitch the corpse into the tunnel behind the house. She never mentioned this—Lars just went away.

Things with Jack and Liss weren't working out exactly as he had wanted. They had only been in the car for twenty minutes, but already there seemed to be a renewal of some kind of old exclusivity, a clubhouse mentality that had existed between Liss and Jack but had since been abolished. He realized that he was drawing too many conclusions from too little evidence. He didn't care. He was relegated to the backseat from the beginning, hearing only the accentuated syllables and the laughter from the conversation in front. And he saw Liss leaning over to kiss Jack, and Jack doing the same to Liss, the car swerving violently whenever he did so. There was no radio. The windows were kept up, though the three of them were sweating, bibs of discoloration beneath their necks, the dull pink of flesh with wet white fabric superimposed. This made Michael's feelings more acute somehow. Sweat dripped into his eyes at steady intervals.

He rubbed a clear spot onto the foggy window. Jack apparently didn't know how to use the defog, or the defog didn't work, because he kept trying to squint through the haze of the windshield, and, every time, when he gave up, or when someone honked at him, he would rub a tank-like slit of clear space at the level of his eyes, observe the road ahead of him as through a periscope, as if it were a feature of the horizon to be considered as something not quite tangible.

Michael had forgotten how few cars drove on the streets of Carriage Town. Nobody walked. But personal vehicles, once the blood running through the city's veins, had been replaced by trains. Most of the wider-laned roads had had their space appropriated for tracks. He watched a train pass by them, watched it get closer as Jack leaned over to kiss Liss, before whipping back away as the car was under control once more. Trains were the prominent geographical feature in much of Carriage Town, and they—and their tracks—became denser as

one approached the city's hub. Lars hadn't seen it in years, but he knew when the train passed away from the front of his window and he saw a squat brick building with glowing metal orbs marking the corners, and a train yard all around the building that stretched for miles, that they hadn't been driving to edge of the city at all but instead had driven directly to the factory.

Michael knew where his mother had worked. He hadn't known as a child but he had puzzled it together on his own, through both intuition and a simple process of elimination. What else would curl her spine downward and bend her hands so claw-like? She was working a job that was destroying her, causing her to deteriorate too rapidly—he only couldn't make sense of it as a child. But he realized that she did it for him, somehow.

He opened the door—no matter that the car was still moving.

His face seemed to hit the ground before anything else, the gravel ripping across his cheek. The drawn-out cry of brakes. Tires shedding themselves on the road. The sharp crack of splitting flesh. The sting of sweat on a freshly opened wound. And then he was tumbling, a shadow play of smokestacks and billowing darkness and glowing orbs against the dark sky and asphalt, before a heavy, sharp jab at the center of his back stopped his rolling and steadied his vision.

The opening of car doors.

Michael lifted himself. His back had hit the corner of a bench.

Liss's voice, high and worried: "Michael?" Footfalls.

That fever again. The familiar fever. The House of Chains at the junction, the house that looked like it might float away or explode or both. The fence before him. The bench. Why a bench? The train tracks beyond the high barbed wire. Figures in the distance, rail workers, shadows through the smoky haze. They hardly seemed real.

Jack's voice, low and threatening, like a box of rocks dropped from a great height: "The fuck is your problem?" His hair was thrashing behind him, his mother's necklace wrapped around his fist.

Michael's singular thought as he looked around him: Mother? Everything reminded him of his mother. It was the factory—maybe his mother was still there. Maybe she had never left, wouldn't come home until he made it home. He wondered why he didn't think of her more often. He clutched at his temple and felt his fingers slip, blood-slick, against his skin. His eyes watered and when he looked up the two figures—Liss almost upon him now—looked foggier even than the smoke-dark haze before him. He wondered why he trusted these people.

He was breathing heavily and very abruptly became aware of the pain, the burning, and his eyes rolled around, disconnected from what he wanted to see, and he saw the two of them bearing down in their fashion, Liss with her quick little steps, dark hair bouncing, and worried—Michael imagined, or forced himself to believe—so worried; Jack with his slow, heavy gait, and the scowl he preserved for special occasions, bright hair a star in this place, knowing the chain holding it back, recognizing the smoldering of his eyes; and Michael, finally, regarding them both in the dark and heavy mist, Michael speaking to them before they came within arms' reach: "Liars, you're both liars," and Liss stopped, and Jack did not, and both looked at him with a kind of hurt he hadn't seen before, from anyone.

And, feeling the need to continue, "You took me from her." His voice was hoarse. He didn't realize his voice could be so rough. It hurt the left side of his face whenever he swallowed or spoke, and he felt as if this was somehow overdue. He couldn't explain any of this. But he looked to his side and saw a chain-link door in the chain-link fence, heavy mechanism keeping it shut, and he knew he had to get inside. And with his second glance he stepped backwards

towards it, knowing that the two before him, so close, would keep him from this. He probed the air behind him with his left hand, his right ready at his side, his eyes moving from Liss to Jack and Jack to Liss.

She moved toward him all at once, a series of quick strides he mistook for one, and her hand on his wrist was so, so soft, and remained so even when he whipped his arm away repeatedly, as if trying to remove excess moisture. She was thrown to the ground like a ragdoll. Jack stepped in and threw his knuckles against the wound on Michael's cheek. The crack of Michael's head on the asphalt echoed over the thrum from the factory.

Had it been snowing this whole time, Michael wondered? It was a small, fine snow, less than a dusting. But still, he saw it come from the sky and down upon him, though he didn't feel it. After he blinked, slow and heavy, Jack was all he saw, his hair untied, his mother's silver necklace wrapped around his knuckles, the look on his face one that, Michael had noticed, he reserved only for Liss before he beat her.

And he very consciously, upon recognizing that face—the mean half-smile, the furrowing of his brow, and the peculiar tilt of the eyes, as if Jack were afraid they'd fall out—Michael gripped Liss's wrist, hers gripping his all the harder, dug in with his fingers and with his fingernails, the flesh more pliable than he imagined or remembered, the tendons beneath struggling to work free, Liss repeating softly and waveringly the same syllable again and again: "Please." There were tears in her voice.

Michael felt the necklace eat into his face. It hurt more than he thought it could. Jack, after each punch, was sure to grind the silver into the wound, and Michael felt every link scraping below his skin. He was almost certain that someone screamed, but wasn't sure if it was his scream. Both Jack and Michael were spattered with blood, Michael's face multicolored and

swollen and cut, their white shirts streaked red. And Jack wasn't stopping, as he had always stopped with Liss. His nostrils flared. The colors on his face made it all seem absurd. And for Michael, flailing was the only thing that made sense, flailing and keeping hold of Liss, feeling her weight against his own. The resistance of her body balanced against the heaviness of Jack's. And Michael pulled her, pulled her closer, pulled her in.

She smashed a stone against Jack's head.

When Jack hit the ground, there wasn't even a crack or a snap. Only a complicated series of scrapes and scuffles, and Michael knew he would be up soon. So he kept hold of Liss and he dragged her with him to the fence, it's barb-wire snare up top all the more imposing, and heard, just as his hand was alighting against the steel,

"The fence is—"

And he shook, then, against his will. It felt as though he had swallowed the sun. It *looked* as though he had swallowed the sun, his vision all starbursts and complicated interweavings of bright colors, a fluorescence he wouldn't have otherwise believed in superimposed against everything he tried to see.

#

If I tell you what happens in advance, am I obligated to make sure that you hear that it happens? Must I speak the truth?

So: everyone dies. Passive voice.

The way this colors the story is much the same as how Michael's vision is colored upon touching the fence.

So people will die, and there's nothing anyone can do, or something everyone can do. Death is foremost a matter of playing with expectations.

#

Joanna rifled through everything of her son's. She overturned the mattress and cut it open, and did the same with the box spring. She took her son's dresser drawers and flung them across the room, splintering, punching holes in the drywall, and ever further breaking the little bits of glass that still lined what was left of the window. She went through his closet and pulled out his coat and went through all the pockets and then threw it atop the drawerless dresser. She kicked the mirror on the inside of the closet until it shattered. It took her two tries—unbalanced on the first, falling backwards onto what was left of the mattress, narrowly avoiding a sharp spring that was sticking out like a pillar in a ruin. The fall hurt her back, aggravated an injury that was aggravated every work day, but she dealt with the pain and the resulting nest of colors that burst open in front of her eyes as she kicked at every bare spot in the wall at foot level until it looked like someone had beat in the drywall with a shovel. She unlocked Michael's toy chest. She was afraid he'd hurt himself or choke on smaller toys or something bad, something terrible, if she let him have his toys while she wasn't around. She tore open his stuffed animals and stomped on his plastic action figures and threw his toy trains into the holes in the drywall and, finally, she wept, and eventually she sobbed.

She clenched her teeth and keened and tore her clothes and ripped a chunk of her hair out at the roots, little flecks of blood splashing her hands, a trail working its way down her scalp. She was curled in on herself. She felt old. She wondered: when did her fingers start to curl and become clawlike? How old was she then? The crescent of her fingers was all she could feel. Her face was buried between her knees, her knees against her chest, her back arched with each vertebrae of her spine poking out like the back of a baby dinosaur sitting in the middle of a wasteland—nothing in the room was whole any longer.

She was old. She didn't know her age for certain, but she felt older than she should have, knew she looked older than she should have. She lit a cigarette and let it fume dully in her hand, hanging out in front of her knees; small cylinders of ash falling sporadically; she hoped the room would catch on fire, but the ash kept falling into her shoe. It burned her and she did nothing to stop it. She hadn't remembered her birthday. Had Michael not, when she got home and unlocked his room, jumped out and yelled "Happy Birthday," had he not hugged her and sang to her in his squeaky, bright voice, she would not have remembered, or cared. She told herself that she had made up her birthdate for his benefit. But she cried a little when he sang to her, because she was always a little surprised when he showed her that he loved her. It simply wasn't something that she expected. She didn't smile often, but she smiled at Michael's little gestures of affection. She managed a smile from the memory, told herself that he wouldn't leave voluntarily, that someone must have done something to him, had to tell herself this again and again because she didn't entirely believe it. She snubbed out her cigarette on her ankle and hoped it would scar.

#

"Back off! Back the fuck off!" It was Liss's voice, shrieking, wavering, unsteady and unstable and hurt. A quick, heavy footfall and he heard it again, the words "back off" a kind of talisman against forces known and otherwise.

Michael could only listen. He kept his eyes screwed shut tight against the pain, the cooked feeling of his hands—the skin, he could tell, without seeing, was *crispy*—the intimidating array of colors swimming behind his eyelids. He would not be permitted to see nothing, apparently.

"Let's go, Liss." Jack, stern-voiced and heavy sounding. "Leave him. Get up." He had never heard Jack demand something so bluntly; he sounded frightened.

Michael could feel snow landing on him in isolated blips. Each time he felt a small circle of cold touch his flesh, the amorphous colors squirmed and brightened and stabbed into his head. He hurt enough to realize, finally, that he was on his back. The concrete chilled him through his shirt, stiff with blood.

The desperate intonation, “Back off, back off!”

The scraping of a boot on concrete, Jack yelling, voice strained and tenuous, “Leave him, just leave him. It was a mistake to bring him with us.”

Michael realized then, feeling returning to the rest of his body, that he still held Liss’s wrist, held it, in fact, as hard as he could, felt the bone around his fingertips, the flesh softer than it should be, the softness of bruised skin. And Liss, too, was holding his wrist, so much more softly, gentle in a way he couldn’t possibly be.

He processed the tug on his arm before he processed the sound of Jack’s fist against her face, the thud of her head against the ground. He was certain he could open his eyes now, the colors more subdued, but he kept them closed out of fear, as if the situation could no longer touch him if he could avoid seeing it.

And Liss repeated herself, weakly, from a point nearer his ears: “Back off.”

And, miraculously, he did. Just said, “That’s it, then?” and Michael heard his footfalls echoing in the silence, heard the car start and drive away.

“You can open your eyes now,” said Liss, “He’s gone.” Michael wasn’t sure if there was any regret in her voice, or if she was just in a great deal of pain.

And so he opened his eyes to the dark, splotchy sky, the colors winding their way around his peripheral vision gentler than before; turned and saw Liss’s face hovering above, one side swollen and colored like a rotten cantaloupe; and turned and saw her hand around his wrist,

hands too small to touch her fingers to her thumb; and saw his hand gripping hers with vein-bulging force, her own wrist discolored like moldy cheese, her hand curved and clawlike. The snow was sparse and he wondered if it was hurting her and if the pain was why she had chased Jack away, somehow.

Liss began to cry and he wondered at what point he could bear to let go of her wrist.

He didn't let go then, not right away.

#

Locks. She should have used more locks. She would need more locks, to be ready.

Joanna left home.

Joanna bought locks.

Joanna bought chains.

The double deadbolt on the bedroom door had not been enough. Her son was missing. She had done almost everything in her power to keep him safe, and her only regret was that she hadn't done more. Because he was gone. Because she had nothing left. She screamed and she wept and she pulled more of her hair out, did the things she would struggle to keep shut away while she was at the store. She needed to see her son. She needed her son.

So she bought locks and she bought chains, preparing for the day her son would come home. Because she knew he would. Come home. Until then, she would have to calm herself by other means. Her scalp was bleeding. Her eyes were puffy. She keened without warning, a high-pitched distress signal. Her son. Her child. Her baby boy.

She went to work the next day. What else would she do? All she had was gone, but she needed to work to keep her house and to save if she could so her son could find his way home

and she would have money to take care of him when he came home. Which he would. Come home.

So she carried machine parts across the factory floor. She rode the train back and forth. She ached. She itched. She stopped speaking. She went home and there was nobody else. She kept telling herself he'd come back. She did this for years. And she was sure he was lost. That he was living on the streets. She started giving money to every homeless person she saw, in the hope that it would somehow make its way to him. She started looking for homeless people so she could give them money. Sometimes they threw it back at her, so she stopped giving coins. She started asking them about Michael. She didn't know what to do. At home, she kept a mass of heavy chains and locks by his bedroom door, waiting for him to come home. She would be sure to keep him when he did.

#

Life is as much about the unremembered and unrememberable as it is about the things that can't be forgotten. But always we try to will what can't or shouldn't be remembered back to the front of our collective unconsciousness. Tattoos, photographs, music, art—all attempts to remember things more vividly, take things back from the dark of the unknown, or to steal someone else's memory—all attempts to claim that the minutiae of a life actually *matters*.

All attempts to resist the order of the universe, which is to *forget*. We try to ignore that the universe is this way because the universe is tremendously merciful.

Michael knows this, somehow, intuitively: that had anything in his life turned out differently, it would have turned out *worse*.

And so Michael was grateful, then, to be laying on the cold concrete, face swollen and bleeding, shirt stiff and crusty with blood, and Liss weeping softly above him, wondering if he

could speak or see, because he gave no indication of either, only looked lost in his way. This had become natural to him. He was grateful when she helped him to the bench and sat with her head on his shoulder, grateful when they both began to shiver with progressively more violence, grateful when he willed himself to release her wrist, and grateful when the sound of trains coming in and out of the train yard drowned out the growing compulsion to say something to Liss, to justify his behavior.

#

That the fence was electrified would surprise few people. The factory was Carriage Town's hub: everything depended on it, everything in the city was made there. Without the factory, there would be nothing. So large and deep and vast was it, above and below ground, that nobody doubted that even the smallest of essentials and nonessentials was built there, by the hands of the workers in Carriage Town.

They saw the dense wall of trees and foliage at the city's edge—which somehow existed and flourished despite the copious lack of sunlight—where the train tracks circled back around on a daily basis. And had anyone made it through all that foliage, they would find a vast and empty expanse of grassland rimmed in place by tentative sunlight, the wall of smoke overhead breaking in places, and ending toward the end of their field of vision. They would be able to see the sun. They would be able to see the boundaries of Carriage Town's new wall, far away, and the remains of its old one, mostly cleared, at the outside edge of the tree line.

#

In a city where people didn't often say much to one another, the House of Chains inspired gossip, at least among those waiting on the train platform. The windows broken, chains over the roof, across the empty windows, all around the house—everywhere save the door, where every

morning a rail-thin woman with a cigarette and a curved spine would leave, and every evening would return. Her home was a spectacle, but anytime anyone got close she would scream at them and she would demand they bring back her son, sometimes coming out and chasing them away with a knife or a swinging chain, sometimes content to scream, shrilly, over the noise of the trains and the city, a shriek echoing across the dark and under the billowing sky, "My son, my son, bring him back, my son!"

Or, that's how it was for a time.

On the inside, the house rattled. Everywhere Joanna walked, the clink of chains followed her, chains knee-high in places. When she fell from trying to drag herself through her home, she took to climbing on all fours. Thick links and large links and small links and thin links, rattling and dragging against her and the floor, swaying from the ceiling when she bumped them, the devastation of Michael's bedroom now buried beneath the only way she knew to keep him safe.

She realized, one day, after staying home for so long, leaving only to bring more locks and more chains into her home, to feed herself sometimes, that she had everything she could need to keep Michael safe, save Michael. She needed him to come back. For him to come back, she needed him to have a home to come back to, and so she left the broken window of his bedroom broken, and she cleared an opening in the chains for it on the house's outside, and she cleared the chains from his bedroom. They became waist-high in places, and she made an effort to make his room like it was before she had devastated it. She sorted the broken bits of his toys from the clothes and the hunks of drywall and she puts the pieces back in his toy box and she wrapped the toy box in heavy chains and padlocked the chains everywhere she could attach a padlock. It looked as though she had modeled a prison after a porcupine, so many locks jutting out at severe angles. She put the broken dresser drawers together as best she could and filled

them with the torn clothes and stuffed it all in broken body of the dresser; it was uneven because she had broken off two of its legs, and she broke off the other two then, wanted it to be stable for her son. She piled the drywall chunks inside the holes in the walls, coughing and sneezing and rubbing her eyes at the cloud of dust that arose. It was the best she could do; she would always do the best for Michael. Even when he was gone, even when she would be an old woman and he would be an adult, he would still be her little boy, her baby boy, and she would do everything she could to keep him safe from anything and everyone.

People took to calling the train platform near the House of Chains haunted. Often overheard would be the clank of the train when the train wasn't near, the steel-on-steel scrape disembodied from the noise of an engine; the sound of a shackle falling to the ground, or being snapped shut, or the slow, dull scrape of metal on concrete, like a machine pulling itself somewhere without wheels. The foreign sound of an axle grinding itself to powder, the shriek of alloy bending itself apart. That is what the platform became: a repository for the ghosts of machines and steel, and the echoes of an eternally opening, unseen lock.

#

Joanna carried the parts from machine to machine. She clinked when she walked. She carried: headliners, mostly, but also machine parts when machine parts needed to be carried. That was her function. She carried. It had been a while since she had carried things besides chains, and her body heaved with the effort.

On her lunch break she avoided the break room, stayed on the industrial floor. She had never stayed behind before, and never heard it so quiet. Only the little clink of the little chains around her ankles resounded. The lights were dimmed on breaks, everything a shadow play of steel and conveyor belts. She walked, rattled with each step. She spent her workdays moving

back and forth across a span of concrete that was about as long as the distance from the shack to the car, outside of Carriage Town. She thought of the car while she was working, the broken promise, coins of rust dotting its surface like buckshot. She walked in one direction this time, watching the shadows shift around hers. Her metallic footfalls sounded natural here. This is what anyone would expect: metal on metal, even alone. She walked for so long, eyes on her feet, that when the lights came on and she looked up, she was lost. The machines here were unfamiliar, the belts strange-shaped, the steel edges too dull or too sharp or both. She didn't know what happened in this part of the factory.

But there were still shadows. And footfalls. A child's footfalls, too close together to be an adult's.

She followed the sound. It was, in that moment, the sum of her hopes, or the sum of what she believed her hopes to be. She hooked it to her brain and hoped it would pull her to her son.

Her stride was a commotion. The quiet split like a melon. She didn't understand that she was screaming at those footsteps, knowing somewhere inside of her that the footsteps would be attached to a shadow would be attached to her son. She passed workers, all conveyor belts and machines stationed at the sides and workers carrying parts from belt to belt and machine to machine. She saw a dark figure ducking under the end of the line. She threw herself to the floor and pulled herself up at the other side, and when she took a stride she fell to the ground and her nose bent laterally. She pulled herself up, blood sheeting her mouth, and she tried to untangle the loop of chain that had hooked itself on bolt. She still wasn't free. She understood nothing there. The chains around her ankles had looped themselves around a stanchion. Her hand shaking, she yanked the chain, jolted herself closer to the machine, pulled and pulled and failed and failed. She heard steam release nearby, giving way to the thrum and the roar of more distant machines.

She pulled, and when she pulled she turned and saw a child-sized shadow waiting, jutting from around a distant corner. She fretted, cried, turned around, examined the chains with unstable hands, blood pooling into the neck of her shirt. The chain had eaten into her ankles—it wasn't coming off until she found her son. She needed them close, the tools to keep him safe. The chain had caught on several bolts at the base of the stanchion. She removed it as carefully as she could, hands clattering the chain like a set of toy teeth, and she took great pains to wrap it back around her ankle, bruised and chafed and swollen; she relished the coolness of the steel on her skin. She coughed a deep cough, and blood sprinkled the ground between her legs. It looked like a Rorschach. She pushed herself up and clipped her forehead on a jutting piece of metal, remained on her feet. She felt the blood only distantly. It wasn't real; Joanna knew better than that. She wouldn't be fooled. She angled her head around the offending part, shuffled forward for a step before picking up pace, followed the shadow around the corner.

And there was nothing there. A dead end. She didn't know the factory had dead ends; it was too efficient for that. But there it was: nothing.

#

"I miss my mom. I would sing to her. Is that normal? Singing to your mother?" Michael was too cold and becoming slightly delirious. He assumed that they would die there.

"I never had a mom," said Liss. They were still shivering violently, but less forcefully since they had huddled together on the bench. "Just the other one. How would I know?"

She was very pretty to Michael then, so close that he couldn't see her face, only the dark hair up against his mouth that smelled of sweat and sex. "Everyone has a mom," he said, "That's just a fact. There's no way you couldn't."

"Running isn't normal, I don't think. I don't think you're normal at all."

He sniffed hard and long, squeezed her as if crushing her body against his would warm them up. “But we all found each other, Jack and you and me. We’re like each other’s mothers. We take care of each other.”

“Took care of each other.”

“No.”

“Did you forget what just happened?”

And they were quiet then. There was yelling in the train yard behind them, workmanlike shouts bolted across the fresh snow. A train passed by, wheels clicking seconds against the track.

“He’ll come back,” said Michael.

“He’s not coming back.”

“He’ll come back.”

“I don’t want him to come back.”

“We need him to come back.”

The sky was roiling. Michael wondered why smokestacks didn’t make more noise. Wondered why smoke didn’t make any noise. He imagined that if it did, it would be a kind of low roar.

Liss’s voice was shaking. “How can you be so optimistic?”

“It would be more optimistic to say that he’s not coming back.”

And so they went, back and forth, until an hour later, both shivering too forcefully, too much primal, unconscious urgency, a black sedan stopped in front of the bench, and Jack stepped out of the driver’s side and forced them both into the back. It was a different car than before.

They didn’t resist.

#

Nothing but the overpowering scent of ginger. It tickled Joanna's nose; she could smell it through the blood. It stunned her so deeply that she didn't turn around when she felt a hand on her shoulder; she stayed still, bleeding, watching the dead-end wall and trying to make sense of it. She turned only when her nose started to burn, and she couldn't tell if it was because it was broken or because of the smell. She found herself looking into the eyes of a child-faced man a head taller than her, head shaven, red beard. He was thin and he looked like one of her lovers from long ago, and she told him so, as a means of introduction. She had lost the picture in her head. He smelled like her lover, too. Her world was churning.

She added, "I'm looking for my son. I saw him run over here," and her voice cracked at a shriek.

The man smiled and said, "We take care of our own." He looked like he wanted to eat her, but she nevertheless followed when he told her to do so. He held her hand, and his fingers felt stiff as the chains around her ankles.

He led her back to the factory floor and past the machines and conveyor belts that thrummed and crashed in time to their steps, and he led her through a hallway with sterile fluorescent lights, doors lining the walls as far as she could see. It was more like a nightmare of a hallway than an actual hallway.

They walked for only a few minutes before Joanna stumbled. Nothing held still for her. She coughed and blood bubbled in her mouth and nose. The bubbles made her sneeze a scattershot onto the white tile floor. This place was far too bright for her; it unsettled her stomach. She coughed again, asked where they were and coughed some more. The pattern at her feet was turning into a puddle. The front of her shirt was soaked; it stuck to her chest like a wet

scab. She tried to fall to her knees, but the bald man caught her under her arms and pulled her a few doors down, and took her inside.

Brighter lights. He pulled her up and set her in a chair. Her eyes were almost closed; the world was made of light and blood, and whenever she tried to get a better look, one overwhelmed the other, and so she was cautious about opening her eyes. She was cautious about moving. She slumped in the chair, tried to keep from slipping off on either side, and she wept, and then she screamed.

She was red. Her teeth were red. Her clothes were red. The ground at her feet was red. And, increasingly as she screamed, the man, rubbing at her face with a washcloth, was red, spattered from Joanna's mouth. He worked patiently while she screamed patiently, rinsing the cloth in a bucket by his knees, until it was more blood than water and he had to get up to drain it. Joanna's wailing settled into a low keening as he came back; her bleeding had slowed, but there had been so much blood and, even after a long rinse, the washcloth was so saturated that he was just smearing blood on her face. He stuffed her nose with tissue paper and wrapped some around the gash in her head. There were no bandages. Through the narrow, drippy slits of her eyes, Joanna could see that there was nothing in the room save a sink and the chair she occupied.

When she shifted her weight, finally, her ankles clinked. The bald man, at her feet, pulled up one of the legs of her tattered jeans.

Chains. Chains drawn tightly around her ankle, a padlock holding them in place. As he looked closer, he saw the bruised flesh underneath, black and soft like a moldy chunk of cheese. The other ankle was the same.

Joanna spoke in a strained whisper: "My son."

The man sighed and stood up. He did not seem surprised. He said, "What's his name?"

“My son,” she said, and then louder, a kind of whip-crack in the syllables, “My son.”

“You’ve lost him?”

“My son.” Crack.

“What’s his name?”

“My son.” Crack. Crack.

“Only child?”

Crack. “My son.”

He laughed, a deep, throaty noise, and he rinsed the washrag once more and tried to wash the blood smears from her face, and failed.

He said, “How old is he?”

“You look like him,” Joanna said. She didn’t think she had said it loud enough for him to hear, but the look in his eyes turned sharp. She didn’t think she had said it aloud. She swallowed hard and she shifted (chains clinking, the music of her new life); she pulled the blood-heavy shirt away from her chest to feel its weight, letting it clap back against her skin.

The bald man leaned in close and said to her, “You know you shouldn’t be here. Why are you here?” And before she could respond he yelled, “*Don’t say it!*” She felt the wind of his breath. And she struggled then to breathe, her nose packed, the man so close.

And she was going to try, finally, to stand, but the hands were holding her down, their grip on her neck. Colors splashed across her eyes for a very long moment before they resolved into a simple, slick darkness, like the rainy skies of Carriage Town.

But these hands felt familiar. She knew these hands, the pattern of the fingers on her throat. The spacing. The workmanlike calluses. The edges of the unkempt fingernails against her flesh. Joanna knew these hands very well.

It had been an inauspicious day. These kinds of days always were. It had been before she became a wanderer. Before Lars. This had been another man. She had forgotten other men existed. She had forgotten there was a time before him.

Near the city center, a home, a husband with a job, a neighborhood with the smooth sidewalks. Carriage Town was a very literal place in that the center was the hub in every sense of the word. Just as Joanna had been an alcoholic in nearly every sense of the word. But she always took care of her child. Her son.

It had been, and still was, difficult for her to keep the stories in her head, lived and otherwise, arranged into what happened and what did not. But she knew that the hands at her throat had happened; she knew this from memory and from the miasma of her own neuroses, the way she refused to wear a scarf in the worst cold or to leave her son alone with men, or to allow her son contact with men beyond what was absolutely unavoidable (as at school, which pained her greatly). And the hands, they had found that resting place more than once. And once, her son had seen. Or had he? She didn't know. She didn't know if his portrait had superimposed itself on the amorphous colors of the asphyxiate's vision, or if he had actually been standing there, behind the owner of the hands, watching his mother against the wall, tongue poking out like it might try to jump free.

But at that time, she had had a house, and a husband, and a son, and a bottle, in any case. And there seized a sadness in the back of her throat—just as she was falling into a great and familiar unknown—when she realized that it had been the calmest period of her life.

#

There is cruelty everywhere. Some people call it fate, but this is escapism at work. Personal responsibility is cruel. Calling something fate is its own responsibility. Eating away at

yourself can become reflexive, but is it responsible? (How is it not?) There's only so much one can do, is the saying—the cliché is painful because it's true: one can't help but be passive. But even the inevitable has its limits.

Carriage Town folds into itself almost to a point of no return; it is itself a stand-in for navel gazing, though blind. It is as much a product of a collective imagination as it is of a collective prosperity and a collective suffering.

What is the outside world? And why does it matter, if it matters?

#

"My father," Liss said, "used to say that he was playing a game with me. Used to tell me we were playing hide and go seek."

Jack was driving, his blond hair streaked red and flaking blood. His hair was loose and disheveled, his mother's necklace still around his knuckles, caked red. Michael and Liss were in the back seat, and Liss was thrown into him every time Jack took a turn. He was driving very fast, and didn't seem to know where he was going. He grunted when Michael asked.

Liss fell into him. He could feel the sponginess of her swollen face through his shirt.

"My father," she said, "never let me play outside." She had begun to cry. It must have stung her face, was all Michael could think.

There wasn't much else for him to think just then. They were being taken somewhere, and Liss was suddenly intent on being mired in what he thought were a lot of little injustices. That her father wouldn't let her outside? This was normal. She'd said nothing of being locked in a room, and even if she had—what would the problem have been? It would have been because he cared too much about her. But he had said such things to her before, and her response was

always to look like she had been struck, and to hug him long and hard. He didn't like the implications.

Jack was intent on ignoring their conversation. His head was no longer bleeding. He was driving in wide circles, was Jack—Michael knew because it was all fence outside, all fence around the factory, and once, peering out the window, he had seen a wide red spot in the snow near a bench. He watched the spot recede.

There was something wrong with Jack, yes, but he had the car and it was warm in the car, and Michael was finally beginning to stop shivering. Jack seemed worth enduring for this much. Jack had always left their presence for what Michael suspected were especially crazed outbursts—he had to give him credit for that much. That Jack, in a sense, protected Michael and Liss from himself, a discretion on Jack's part that had proven crucial, as Michael didn't know what to do without him—and, he suspected, neither did Liss. Jack was their soul; his presence offered them a rubric for action, and for the lack thereof. They knew, in so many ways, what was expected of them; and, everything else aside, Michael, on a very basic level, enjoyed *looking* at him, attempting to parse all the tattoos, crude as they were.

But this Jack—this was not a Jack Michael could pretend to understand.

Liss said, "He was always there, was the problem. I wish he'd have at least hid from me."

"Shut up," said Jack. His voice was quiet and steely. A threat. Jack was not to be trifled with today. Jack was not, Michael realized, to be trifled with any time, and his jumping out of the car earlier had been a kind of trifling, as had Liss's bid to defend him. And Jack, as was his custom, left them to explode somewhere else, with someone else, on someone else. It made entirely too much sense for Michael's comfort. But he had come back. He wasn't finished.

His jumping from the car was a moment where he felt had felt the confidence to strike out on his own, a confidence that imploded the moment he had to ask himself what he should do next. It was the same feeling as rushing off the train to see the House of Chains, trying to convince himself that it was home when it clearly wasn't, because his mother's house, his home, was not covered in chains. And his inaction had taken him away from that place.

He looked out the window. The factory. He wanted in.

Jack said, "You know where this car was built, right?" He was, mercifully, watching the road. Michael nodded, not really thinking, and Jack continued, "And your clothes? And the trains? And the food? I hear they have an entire wing that's just a slaughterhouse, another where they grow crops under artificial lights.

"And the lights," he said, voice cracking, looking as though he might cry, "they replicate the sun. You said your mom told you stories about the sun, right? And you didn't believe her, and you didn't believe me, but I'm telling you, without the sun we wouldn't be able to live because the engineers in that factory"—stabbing a finger toward the building, knuckles splotched red and white, the first time he'd taken a hand off the wheel since they got in the car—"wouldn't know what to copy to make plants grow if they didn't have an original.

"I realized how much I missed it the last time we stopped. At the house. The sun. I saw it once, and it made coming back here so, so sad, Michael. So sad." And he wept. The car swerved; he had lost his composure and it wasn't coming back. He was staying on the road, but he was using all of it. The car rumbled when he crossed train tracks.

To Michael's memory, it was the first time that Jack had called him by his name. Liss, who had never said his name to him, was trying to clamber into the front passenger seat—

Michael hadn't noticed her pulling away from him; the fence outside, what was behind the fence, was more interesting to him.

"Please stop the car," she said, after successfully getting up front, and still trying to get her legs in front of her.

And Jack screamed this time, "Shut up."

"You'll kill us," she said

And he pressed the gas pedal to the floor. The engine blared, and Michael felt as if he was being propelled by a great weight, but just as quickly the engine sputtered and died, one set of wheels rumbling over the train tracks.

Jack beat the steering wheel with a fist; it bounced back and he almost punched himself in the jaw. He leaned forward and wept. Then up with his head, and turning back to look at Michael, finally, said, "This isn't all my blood. Or yours." His eyes were darting—he looked every bit as wild as the blood caked in his hair suggested.

When Liss tried to touch him, he punched her in the jaw so hard that her head ricocheted against the window. Even Michael could hear a loose tooth rattle in her mouth before she spit it out.

Already the other side of her face was swelling, and blood running out of the corner of her mouth—she spit blood in Jack's eyes, and started punching his face with both hands, one after the other, and when he—the dried, scabby blots of blood on his face and in his hair glossed over and slick anew—caught his bearings he grabbed her by the wrists. She thrashed and head-butted him. Blood poured from both their noses.

Michael jumped out of the backseat. He knew whose side he was on. He opened the driver's door just as Jack was screaming, heaving, teary-eyed, "You broke your thumbs! How can you be so careless with yourself? Don't you know—"

And that was when Michael pulled him from the car and threw him to the ground; Liss was pulled over into the driver's side, wrists in Jack's hands, stretched painfully with a foot wedged under the passenger's seat. Both of their noses were folded to one side and Liss's thumbs were both larger and than they should have been. He couldn't see the set of their faces, or even the look of their eyes, for all the blood.

He stomped into Jack's elbows, one after the other, to force him to let go, and he did. Let go of her. He did, and it was more than Michael could have hoped for.

Liss spit at Jack's face, said, "Piece of shit. Piece of shit." Her voice rang in the still air. The snow melted quickly when it touched their bodies; Jack and Liss looked like the skin on their faces had been freshly ripped off, all red wetness.

Michael sat down on the track, said, "I'm sorry," to both of them and to no one.

Jack started to laugh. He was laughing and crying at the same time, and when Liss spat on him again and demanded to know why, he said, "Are any of us moving?"

Michael had drawn his knees to his chest. He was rocking almost imperceptibly; Jack stared straight into the sky, arms useless at his side, feet still; Liss struggled, and she yelped with pain when she tried to turn and lean over to free her foot. Blood was streaking like makeup around the corners of her eyes. She was crying.

"That's what's funny," Jack said. "We're not moving and we're on the train track. When has that happened? Do you think people drive the trains? Do you think people do a goddamn

thing around here that happens outside of *that*,” and he gestured his head toward the factory, let it hit the ground with an audible thump.

Michael said, “I’m sorry,” to the air. He was weeping, his back shivering. Michael was not a part of the discussion. He wanted to run away from them, but he felt too guilty.

Liss spit on Jack again, said “My father said I’m too much like my mother. I’ve never met my mother. But you’re just like my father.” She spit on him again. Her saliva had become an indicator of who was speaking—they were like quotation marks, at the beginning and the end of her statements, and always sent to Jack.

The track beneath them began to vibrate. Far away, they heard the train whistle.

Jack kept coughing wetly, like he was trying to breathe underwater, like his lungs were filling and seizing. He coughed like he was drowning in milk. It was impossible to tell what, if anything, was coming out of his mouth with all the blood when he retched, turning his head to the side.

Michael looked at the puddle, looked into Jack’s eyes, apologized again. And when Jack wouldn’t turn his gaze away, Michael tilted his head toward the vomit and said, “We didn’t do that to you.”

Jack’s turned his head to Liss. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.”

“I’m sorry.” Michael could see the train, now, looming. Its horn sounded. It was huge.

“You’re not going to pretend anything,” Liss said. “No more pretending.” She was still stuck and, with the sound of the train, its horn as well as the hum of its engine, she started to shake.

“A bunch of fucken robots,” slurred Jack, “A bunch of fucken robots run this place. They’re not going to stop for anything.”

Liss said, “Stop it.” She dribbled blood on her chin, spat another tooth out.

“This’ll be it, then,” he said. “It’s not like we’re any different.” The ground beneath was rumbling, the train looming large, the headlight elongating their shadows. Michael thought of the videos of nuclear testing his mother told him about when he was a child, the way they would get so bright that there was nothing left, the way they would burn shadows into concrete. That’s what he thought of as the train bore down. He felt the little bump on his temple.

Jack said, “Hold my hand?” Michael assumed he was talking to Liss, who spat on him. Jack said, “It’s not like I would feel it,” and he moved his arms and let his forearms flail and dangle uselessly to punctuate his point.

“Fucking hell,” said Liss, and she reached for his hand, then—but the train stopped. And so she withdrew it.

They had only seen the light, heard the horn, felt the rumble beneath them—none of them had realized it was slowing down.

It was too bright to keep their eyes open.

And so there they were, blood-spattered, scattered just outside of the car, the train blocking the road, Liss still stuck but trying to wrench herself free and yelping every time she tried to pull away—all too bright to see. A loudspeaker flipped on and thrummed static at them.

Michael whispered, “I’m sorry.” It was a prayer.

#

This is not the story of a man saving a woman, or of a woman saving a man, or of the two saving each other. This is not a story about grace. This is not a story about any idea so long abused.

This is the story of a mother and her son. Both abused.

#

Joanna knew, at least, which way was up. Dirt and clay pressed in on her from all sides.

She woke up facedown in the dirt, soil caked all over her. On one side, a thick steel wall with a thick steel door that wouldn't budge; the big circular mechanism wouldn't turn for her. The door was painted black. Patches of rust sprinkled the wall around it. On her other side there was dirt. Dirt walls, ceiling, floor. She had only enough space to stretch her arms like wings. And at first she assumed she would die there, without ever seeing her son again. But she found a small tunnel at her fingertips. She only saw it in shadows because the only light was a dim, yellow, humming artifact above the door. But she saw it, that tunnel, and she could fit in it: Joanna was a small woman, and it was just wider than the length of her shoulders. So she crouched, and pushed herself inside, arms first, and started feeling for handholds, started scratching at the earth, eyes tearing violently as dirt fell in her eyes, but steadily began pulling herself through the hole. It was sloped enough for her knees to gain purchase, and whenever she'd get stuck, she would dig and claw at the soil. She knew which way she was going, at least. She knew which way was up.

And she held on to that. That she knew which way was up. That she knew gravity's angle, despite the earth pressing in on her. Despite her fingernails breaking off against rocks, despite the layers of sediment gathering against her eyeballs and the tears turning it to mud, despite the cuts against pebbles and roots, and her ankles feeling like they would break off at any moment, the clinking a chime for her progress. Despite the dirt in her mouth and her nose, the difficulty breathing, the urge to scream for her son.

She hadn't hesitated because of her son.

She went on, her muscles straining. She was blinded by the dirt, but she knew which way was up.

She stopped for a moment when she felt a strip of warmth against her hand. She could feel it through the sweat-caked dirt. Frantically, she wiped at her eyes, pulling the mud free, and finally, painfully, she opened her eyes and confirmed that warmth as something she had not seen or felt for years.

Natural sunlight. It was natural sunlight.

Her escape took on a new urgency, and she started pushing against the earth with her head and her shoulders, pulling back the loose dirt with her hands, pushing herself ever upward by her feet and her knees; her scalp was cut, her hair was being pulled out, she was bleeding in more places than she could count—and she was hyperaware of this now, because life seemed suddenly to take on another dimension, another small reason for survival. She coughed and breathed heavily and felt her voice go high and low, each little struggle catching in her throat. The dirt was warm. The strip of sunlight was widening. Heat. Joanna carved a space to get a higher foothold, a higher handhold, and she felt the blood rush to her head, and she positioned herself laterally and pushed up with her back, feeling the earth separate around her, crumble in one giant wave, falling back into the dark.

And she felt heat beating upon her back, and a light blooming at the edges of her eyes. She squinted and grabbed the edge of the tunnel where she had broken free, and pulled herself onto a lush bed of grass. She rolled onto her back, gasping—and then she saw nothing but light, and then she couldn't see anything. But she was smiling, enjoying the smell of the grass, hearing the singing of the birds, trapped for the moment in her childhood rather than in her sudden blindness.

#

The House of Chains had been quiet for weeks, but still there simmered a mythology around it. No longer were there the screams of “My son!” nor the echoes of the screams, but people waiting on the nearby train platform remembered, heard it quietly in their heads, in the voices of their own mothers. A bereaved mother can corrupt the core of almost anyone, no matter the circumstances. There were subtle, silent reverberations.

The chains, some of them loosened by the curious, clinked against each other when the wind was strong enough. Some of them hung freely. The outside of the house was graffitied, though nobody tried to get inside. They only looked.

What they would see, if there was light enough to see inside, would be piles of chains, chest-high in places, filling the closets. To step inside would be to hear the sounds of chains unraveling and curling around each other, the rapid-fire bells of chainlinks against chainlinks screaming the disturbance of the house. The destroyed room of a child. In the other bedroom, a mattress wrapped in thick steel links, a mother’s mortification for her failures. And pictures, on the walls, the tables, the dressers. Pictures everywhere, standing and hanging, of a child in an unravaged room, playing with toys or drawings, pictures of the child coming out of the room, locks and latches of the door visible at the edge of the frame, pictures of the child’s drawings on the walls, and the drawings that remained. And in the corner of the room with the chain-wrapped mattress, a rusty red wagon, a child’s, a crater in a room full of knee-deep piles of chains and locks.

#

None of them had ever heard it discussed publicly, but it was always suspected that deviants, once caught, were put to work in the factory. That depending on the crime, depending

on the severity, one was allowed to maintain a home off-campus, or locked inside, watched at all times. It wasn't much different from Carriage Town at large.

And so Michael was not surprised when he woke up in a narrow concrete cell. He heard nothing: no dripping, no machinery, not even an electric thrum. He had a strip of light from the underside of the door illuminating just so much of his room. It was very bright, that light, just enough for him to discern the contours of the room. His shadow stretched far above him, the light a fire in the darkness. There was a drain in the center of the room, and nothing else. The door was solid steel. Just the light underneath. It was strange to be without the thrumming of machinery. He felt suddenly insulated, and he didn't like it.

He closed his eyes and slept, or tried to sleep. He did not know if he dreamed, or if he only thought, waking. It was difficult to differentiate waking from sleep in this place. But his thoughts returned, as they often did, to his mother.

His mother had called him Michael only once, and had apologized immediately, gave him candy the next time she saw him, promised him anything he wanted. She had only called him "son" or "my son" otherwise. But that moment stuck in his head, the name a beacon, a glowing force always before his eyes and always at the tip of his tongue. He had a name. His mother had given him validation. This was an identity. He could forget the days of namelessness, the days of conceiving himself through a title. He told her that what he wanted was a box of crayons.

He drew their house. He drew some trains. The year before, his mother had taken him on a tour of the block, seating him in a little red wagon and pulling him, telling him, "look at the train!" and "look at that person!" and, before running, pulling him extra fast, shouting "hold on!"

and “Wheeeeeee!” as he giggled so hard he wanted to be sick. He couldn’t control it, the giggling, and that was the greatest relief of all. It was one of the only times his mother had let him outside.

He drew that.

He drew his mother coming home from work, all stringy, greasy dark hair worming down to her shoulders, her missing teeth, the cigarette perpetually hanging from the corner of her mouth, the scar on her lower lip that made her look she had been in a knife fight. She let him out of his room when she got home. On her birthday, he came out singing to her, and she cried.

He drew that.

He drew his father, whom he had seen once. His red hair. His mother told him that his father was a sweet man who had done a bad thing, and so he drew him with horns.

His mother’s name was Joanna. He had heard his father say it the day he was there, the only day he was there. But she was only “mom” to him. She didn’t have to tell him that. He didn’t want her to be anything else.

He drew her several times. She was his hero.

He had drawn everything on the walls of his bedroom, a surprise for when she got home. She wasn’t angry. She knelt and she held him and she wept and she told him, again and again, how much she loved him.

And so it was that he found his forehead against cold concrete, running a finger along the wall, relishing the jolt when he caught a nail, trying to draw the entire complicated scene that had spanned all four of his bedroom walls. There was no way to do it here. The light poured from under the door. All was silent. His mother.

#

Joanna and Michael had been happy for almost exactly three years. Then he broke the window and walked to the end of the sidewalk. Three years Joanna tried to decide if it had been worth it. “Tried to decide” is a mischaracterization that she told herself to sound reasonable—she had no question about its worth. She listened to the gush of the river, felt the soil, soft and loamy, against her back. The sun was too hot, but she couldn’t help but enjoy the excess of it, the way it had burned her skin and her skin was red and peeling, the feeling that it would be crispy to the touch, were she to touch her own body. Her broken nose and her myriad cuts and bruises no longer stung. She had found herself blinded. The chains on her ankles no longer stung, though even she would admit that this was almost assuredly because she could no longer feel anything below her kneecaps. She assumed as much, anyway—she hadn’t tried to stand up.

#

Michael’s finger felt like it was worn down to a nub.

He had been tracing it against the wall. He didn’t know how long it had been bleeding. He didn’t care how long it was in standard units of measurements—there was only *before* and *after* to him. He had started by lightly running the pad of his finger against the concrete, relishing the way the rough-hewn wall and his calluses clung to each other, like they were all they had. Which they were. All they had. The wall and the calluses. And this thought saddened Michael. He wanted another variable in the equation. He started drawing his childhood drawings with his fingernail, and it shook him deep in his spine. It was a reaction. It was the most pronounced reaction he had had since waking up there, when he drew with just pad of his right pointer finger. This was new. This was something. He pressed harder, felt the nail give and splinter, audible cracks at his fingertip, jolting through his back so that he shook as he pulled the wreckage of his fingernail across concrete. After four passes, he pulled his finger away. There was blood on the

wall: a vertical line of blood, as perfect as it could be, runny droplets racing to the floor. All this from the light beneath door. All of this. This red line, this border. He leaned toward the door and held his finger to the strip of light, saw how two strips of his fingernail had fractured and stood straight up, the rest of it on the left of his cuticle, a thin, sharp strip, blood welled up all around. He pressed his finger to the wall again, drew horizontal lines.

He switched to his middle finger until he got the same result. He went through all the fingers on his right hand. There was a trail of blood to the drain in the floor. His feet were blood-wet. The wall was painted with irregular density. The irregularity was a nuisance to him. He could tell, even in the low light: parts of the wall were shinier than others. The dullness stood out in his room. And then, too, there was the upper part of the wall that he couldn't reach, and so little of it; and there was the ceiling; and there were three other walls. The floor, at least, had a solid, if unintentional, start. But the irregular coverage—this bothered him only because he thought he had drawn the childhood scenes from his bedroom successfully, reproduced them faithfully, but when he stepped back so that his own shadow wasn't blanketing the wall, he saw that, no, it was only blood; the odd fingerprint stood out against the sheet, to be sure, and in places it looked like he had been pulled down from ceiling, bloody handprints stretching the length of the wall—no, it made no sense, what he had made on that wall. He had the idea that he could cover all the walls and wait for the blood to dry, then redraw everything by scraping it off.

He was about to start with his left hand when the pain hit all at once, like a knife drawn across bone, radiating from his fingertips to his spine. His fingers curled in despite his telling them to stay straight; his hand looked a like a dead spider that had had three legs torn off, like a small animal fallen victim to a sadistic child. His hand dripped, almost poured. It looked like a collection of disparate objects loosely held together by meat. The remnants of his fingernails

jutted out in all directions like a pincushion filled with broken-handled knives. He vomited, had the presence of mind to do it over the drain.

He didn't know how long he had been in this place. Days, based on his hunger and his thirst.

The smell hit him then, of blood and vomit. Something had died, was the smell. Like the dead homeless man they had found in a dumpster once, but worse. He would vomit again if he couldn't get his head away from the smell, so he focused on the image in his head: the eyes of that homeless man: open wide, slick and sticky-looking, like they were full of something sweet.

This is the game he would play with himself, to distract himself, to keep from seeing the messy claw his right hand had become.

The smell was like Liss when she hadn't bathed in months and had just emerged from a dumpster, or like Jack and Liss after they had both emerged from a dumpster and then fucked—there was a sweetness to go with the rottenness, a thickness in the air that wasn't entirely putrid. It was like the rotting box of apples that he and Liss and Jack found in the stockroom of the grocery store when they met, all heavy and soft and indeterminate, flies thick around it like too many puppies suckling their mother, and all into the air when they got close, and in their eyes and their hair and the ears. The buzzing had just been too much.

Michael threw himself onto the cot, facedown. He was aware of the light from under the door having wavered. But he closed his eyes with the intent of blocking it out, of keeping any changes at bay.

He fell asleep, which was the last thing he wanted.

#

Joanna wondered if she had felt these hands before. Her skin was warm; she knew it was the sun, had a glimpse before her vision tore itself from her.

But these hands. Were they her mother's hands?

They were soft enough to be her mother's hands. Soft enough, but not brusque—more than simply perfunctory, these hands lingered on her body. And her mother was never strong enough to lift her.

They were not her mother's hands. She sighed deeply at the thought.

Were they her father's hands? Her father had lifted her, certainly, but these hands were much gentler. These were not her father's hands.

They were moving, was all Joanna could discern, the hands. There were hands working on her, taking her pulse, feeling at her forehead, and finally, seemingly satisfied, just holding her hands.

She had heard speech, but she was in no place to decipher speech.

Were they a lover's hands?

They were not a lover's hands.

These hands were more tender than any of Joanna's lovers.

And she couldn't even see them. Joanna couldn't weep. She didn't know why she couldn't weep. This was the most surprising thing.

The hands squeezed hers.

#

"Your mom and I—we knew each other." The man had close-cut red hair—almost a skinhead—and a ragged, overlarge beard. His head was fuzzy like old mold. He was wearing

torn jeans a filth-splotched tee shirt, work clothes like Michael's mother's. The man's clothes were the reason Michael believed him.

He had awakened nude. He screwed his eyes shut just after opening them. He felt a warming lamp above him, felt it deep below his skin, on the verge of burning the surface. The lamp was too close. The porcelain beneath him was cold. He opened his eyes when he felt warm water splashing against his feet—not when he heard it coursing distantly through a pipe a moment prior, a whisper of nonsense. Only after he felt the water on his skin, verging on too hot. He had the fleeting notion that he was going to be boiled alive. When he opened his eyes, there were only fluorescent lights.

He watched the water rise over his damaged hand—gone black where the fingernails were, shards striking out at odd angles like a deformed cactus, fingertips squared, flecked with blood—and turn pink. It stung his hand, and he relished that much. A sensation that he hadn't felt in some time, not the pain but the enjoyment of the pain, a reminder that he was no longer alone in a dark box. A slab of a hand reached before his eyes and turned off the water.

The water steamed into the air. He found himself wishing the steam were more intense—he didn't want to see clearly. The water was turning a darker red.

“We go way back, your mother and I,” said the man. His voice cracked. It sounded like a rusty nail.

Michael stared, listened. It wasn't that his voice would taste sour from disuse or that it felt as though his throat was swollen—it was puzzlement that kept him silent. He looked at his hand, all shades of black and grey and red. He pulled it up to his face, water sucking at it as he lifted, then, turning, held it to Lars, like an offering.

He had met this one before. He was sure of it.

Lars said, “Yeah, I know. And guess who gets to clean your room?” He barked a laugh, said, “But I get a break, taking you here. Nobody told me to do it but it might as well be done. Not that it would matter, and not that I’ll be going back to work.”

Michael’s eyes had begun to steady; he hadn’t noticed that they weren’t steady until Lars stabilized, until the walls stopped vibrating. He wondered if his ears had malfunctioned in the way of eyes.

He said, “My mother?”

Lars said, “She found me here. She talked about you. Mumbled your features in her sleep.”

Michael did not, in that moment, think to ask why she had “found” Lars, or why he was near her when she was asleep. He did not think to ask him any question at all, because the one he had been absent-mindedly turning over in his head for years and years had been answered: his mother remembered him, knew him. He had wanted to know this all along.

Lars, softening, leaning forward, said, “Your friends are around here somewhere, too.” Michael had stopped listening by then.

He kept quiet until Lars shook him. Lars said, “I was told to say that.”

“I’m sorry,” said Michael.

“We’ve got time,” said Lars, “and I’m not eager to get back to work.” Added, “I could tell you about your mother,” and Michael’s eyes widened, and Lars added, “and you could tell me how you got here.

“You start.”

And he did, started, “It’s always dark in Carriage Town,” and talked for hours.

Michael tried to make up stories about his mother, but Lars held up a hand, stopped him, said, “No. You don’t know. I know,” said Lars

He continued, “Joanna was twenty, and she was in love.”

They took turns, one picking up where the other trailed off. They told everything they knew. They could have been there for days. The water went cold. He shivered, sprouted gooseflesh.

The details of Lars’s story swam over Michael’s head. A part of him refused to believe that this man knew his mother better than he had, and the rest of him, in this refusal, let the details slip away, committed little to memory—only that his mother was searching for him. He would find his mother. It was the only way to finish all of this.

And when they was finished, Lars said, “I know where your mother is.” Michael sat up, tried to clamber over the rim of the tub and lunge, but fell backwards, twisted his neck, flopped back over. He pulled the stopper and water drained.

Lars stood up, took a step back. “Everyone here has to work. I’ve given you enough for free.”

“My mother.” Michael lifted himself out of the tub as slowly as he could.

“Your friends are working. I told them how to get home, is why they agreed. You work here long enough and you’ll see them. Everyone can get home in time.”

A growl, “Mother,” and he threw himself at Lars, who met him with an elbow to the cheek. Michael spiraled to the ground.

“Now god damn it,” said Lars. He bent down and grabbed Michael’s wrist, sat on his chest.

A whimper, “Mother.”

“I’m going to tell you where to find her,” Lars said. He breathed through his teeth, all whistle and friction. “And that’s going to be a contract.”

#

And this is the balance of what Lars said to Michael.

The Michael’s mother was in Old Town. That Old Town was not in the city. That the name *Old Town* was literal. That there were many Old Towns.

That Carriage Town hadn’t expanded in many years. Carriage Town only *moved*. It’s why the walls were a patchwork of scrap metal—it wasn’t worth it to build anything too stable because the boundaries were shifting.

That Carriage Town moved the way it did for the sake of stripping the land bare, and then moving on. That that’s why the outside of the city was sand and bare dirt and ruins—it wasn’t worth the cost of maintenance, so the city moved. There were always people building new walls, tearing down old walls. Carriage Town moved like an amoeba.

That the factory’s underground body was the only thing maintained. That it stretched for miles and miles in all directions. That nobody knew for certain how large it was. That all the tunnels were maintained, and all of them led to what were once the centers of the city, the structures that were once the factory’s above-ground foothold.

That his mother was near one of these.

That he would find these places if he worked long enough.

That he would find his mother if he worked long enough.

#

His mother. Her son. Who is whose, in this equation? Where does ownership begin?

Mumbled your features in her sleep.

As if the hearsay of a mumble could make his mother alive to him again. It did. She had only been an idea before, and always had been.

She talked about you. Mumbled your features in her sleep.

His mother had told him stories of men in her life who knew too much, men who had power they shouldn't have, men who, in his mother's telling, bordered on omniscience. They were all the same man. They were all good men, in her telling, who made one unforgiveable mistake.

No, not his mother; he hadn't seen her in so long that she was just Joanna, or should just be Joanna. Though she never told him her name. This did not strike him as obscene.

We go way back, your mother and I.

Michael had settled into his job with ease. He stalked the sewers beneath Carriage Town. He was told at first—and it was so, at first—that his duties entailed only flushing wanderers out of underground network of tunnels. Most people he found, he killed on sight, at whatever distance, the report of his rifle echoing, the water underneath the walkways rippling. It was only after he could no longer hear his victims scream that he thought to wear any kind of ear protection, and by then he figured it was useless. He only saw them distantly, little figures scurrying through the lenses of the lights that dotted the tunnels. He had a radio at the belt of his jumpsuit, and he called in every shot he fired, whether or not he hit his target. He couldn't hear a response, but always anonymous crews arrived to dispose of the bodies. All they ever did was toss the bodies in the water, and Michael was willing to do that himself, but he liked the feeling of authority, and so always called them in. He liked to speculate on the number of corpses there, and where they'd end up.

His job had to be altered somewhat when he actually got close to target. He went some time, some years, without that happening, never giving chase to runner, only calling them in so his counterparts might be alerted. But he was surprised one day; a target, anticipating him, surprised him at a corner. Michael killed him, and was shaken. He had never gotten so close. And this one had looked like all the men his mother had told him about, smelled of ginger like those men, had been strong like those men, looked imperious like those men. The only surprise greater than that was that the target had been able to die—he didn't think that possible. His mother hadn't allowed for that.

He radioed it in, hoped someone would get tossed to the water. He said, "Lars," let it echo around him. No crews came for this one. He looked like the man who had forced him into this job. They all did. Lars.

Michael knew the power of names. And at so young an age, he knew without knowing that it is better not to question some things in the dark, just as he knew then that it was better to avoid saying Lars's name, to avoid saying anything if possible, to respond with curt nods and head-shakes. He didn't want to give Lars any more power over him than he already had.

Jack was special in this equation. There was a give-and-take with Jack, a power exchange, that hadn't existed with anyone else. He would call Jack's name in the sewers. He would call Liss's name, too. He believed Lars when he said they were working. But then, maybe they had found their way home. It had been years, he was sure.

Lars sent him to the very end of the sewers. The command came via radio; Michael had to hold it very close to hear it, to puzzle out the order. He didn't say—and Michael didn't ask—how far out, in terms of Carriage Town's borders, the sewer went. But Michael went, stalked the outer rim of the sewer system, and even that area was so large and maze-like that he didn't find

an opening, a termination in the pipeline, for months. Every so often, he'd receive a transmission telling him that he was going the wrong way, to turn around, to keep going in one direction. Not once did he encounter anyone else so far out.

He lived in a series underground rooms with cots and provision. There was never an empty room, never a room that didn't open with the key he had been given. When he had initially been forced to take on the role of an underground hunter, Lars had given him the keys to and the address of the House of Chains, and was assigned the territory underneath it. Lars had given him a heavy-duty set of bolt-cutters with the keys, and the bolt-cutters had been the only useful thing Lars had given him.

Michael thought he recognized the place when he ascended to the surface and found himself in the murky half-light of Carriage Town, standing in gravel at a train junction. The junction and the platform had not changed, and neither had the house from the last time he saw it, in a fit, having bolted off a train, Liss and Jack trailing, dragging him back, dragging him home. He had needed to be dragged—he was mesmerized by the chains, as he was just then, strung along the edges of the roof like Christmas lights, wrapped around the house like musculature, tangled and organic. He could barely tell there were walls and windows underneath, so dense were the chains. In the haze it looked like a mirage. He didn't believe in the place, assumed he was hallucinating.

Lars told him the House of Chains was to be his home. It took Michael two hours to cut through enough chain links to open the front door (the key useless, the lock broken). As he cut them, the ends of the chains swung to the ground with curtain-like flourishes.

Inside, he waded through chains—chains caked in dust, clouds ascending when he moved them. Moving meant getting chains tangled around his legs, dragging chains that were tangled in

other chains, tangling them up with other chains, falling when the knots became too large. He had to crawl and tumble. But it was coming to him, all of it: when he sucked air through his teeth like he was absorbing a severe burn, all shock and scarring. The drawings he had done on the wall were still mostly there, yellowed, the paint peeling and the drywall sagging, kicked in everywhere below waist level, chains crammed in where the insulation should have been. He left the room immediately. In his mother's old room, the chains were piled higher than anywhere else in the house: irregular mounds moving up and down across the horizon of the wall like a mountain range, the bed cocooned snugly in chains like some kind of torture device, the window blocked. In the corner, a black steel handle was protruding a dense cluster, and when he pulled and saw the flash of color underneath, he recognized it immediately: it was the red wagon his mother had used to take him exploring.

He sobbed, fell asleep on the chain-wrapped bed, and followed the same routine for the balance of his time there. His back was mangled and his vertebrae felt rearranged. He felt he deserved it.

#

Love is different things to its different owners. Telling someone that what they feel is not love is like telling them that a given god does or does not exist, or that someone owns land somewhere on the other side of a black hole: it can't be definitively proven.

#

When Michael, stalking the underground outskirts, found an exit point to the tunnel, he found two other things. The first was a pile of corpses in various stages of decomposition, all held up against the grate. The water level had risen to get over them, and it was, Michael came to understand, the reason water levels throughout the tunnels were rising ever closer to the

walkways. Every such grate must have been clogged with an airtight skein of the dead. The second thing he noticed was the sun: the way the water sparkled, the way the flesh of the bodies looked—and smelled—like it was cooking, the way the sun made them brighter than he thought anything could be.

#

The phrase “all the time” is not an accident. Everything happens all the time, or *in* all the time. Time is less a continuum and more of a level plane. Things happen before and after each other, but everything has always already happened.

#

The spaces between the bars of the grate were large enough for Michael to easily be able to slip out; the dead were splayed sideways, limbs outstretched. They couldn’t help but be caught.

He slipped through, stepped on the bright grass he’d never seen. It was almost comical. The sun burned his skin. It was the most beautiful hell he could imagine. The water from the tunnel was running down a rock face in front of him and down into river, small groove eroded to guide it all. He listened to it whisper. He smiled, looked straight up, and fell backward. He clenched his eyes. He had not expected the sun to hurt. His body felt like it might catch fire at any moment. He was sweating. He saw colors lazily rolling in front of his eyes before he opened them, and could hardly see the landscape when he did. He was sitting, legs spread wide, and he stared directly between his legs, at the grass.

#

Some say that a mother will always recognize her child, and vice-versa, no matter the circumstance. They were, after all, one person.

#

When Michael finally stood, after the sun had gone low and fiery at the far end of the sky, he ascended the slope surrounding the tunnel exit, and when he mounted the top—a footpath worn bald in the grass—he had to push himself forward and fall on his knees to avoid tumbling backwards with the shock of it.

A massive concrete structure stood before him: not a solid structure, but one full of staircases and holes and angular concrete ducts. Above, overlooking the largest duct, which appeared to feed them all, was a giant rusty pipe half the diameter of the tunnels he patrolled. It was complicated, and looked as though it once fed water through the entire structure—a needlessly complicated maze—and the endpoint seemed to be a concrete slope bordered on either side that would direct the water into the footpath Michael had ascended, feeding it eventually to the river below.

More surprising than the structure was the view: past the structure, he could see Carriage Town from the outside. He never thought it possible. The walls were scrap metal cast-offs, all discoloration and rust. It seemed much too small, much too far away.

More surprising still, looking again at the structure, was the fact that it was built on top of a dirt surface. It sank in strange places. There was a body next to what looked like a tunnel from underground. And it was much too familiar.

#

Because taking care of a sick person will literally suck the life out of anyone. This is different from dying, or suicide, or sacrifice.

#

When Michael found his mother, she was splayed face-down on the concrete and caked in dirt and blood, like botched camouflage paint. The mess of dirt next to her had indeed been a tunnel, though it had caved.

His mother here, amid the ruin—he wanted it to be a shrine to her. When he looked around, not ready to face her, he saw an inscription in the concrete above his head: CARRIAGE TOWN GRAND FOUNTAIN, EST—. And the date was illegible. There were staircases that seemed to lead to the top of the structure, but the sun had bleached them, made them look brittle.

He looked down: how did he recognize his mother? She had been there for a very long time. Her skin was cooked brown from the sun, crispy to the touch; her hair was as stringy as he could remember, and the open mouth was missing all of its teeth. Still, he trusted himself to know his mother, whether or not she was disintegrating.

What could he do for her? She had carried things for him.

He did not cry for her then, nor did he listen for her breath—he didn't know how, and he held fast to hope despite everything.

He sat cross-legged, took the scarred hand—belted with keloids—in both of his. Her hand was hot to the touch, and crinkled when he squeezed it.

He would hold vigil.

#

Joanna had told Michael about the sun once, and only once. “It’s a light in the sky,” she said. “It’s warm,” she said. “It’s warmer than Carriage Town.”

Michael, age six at the time, refused to believe her.

She said, “Just because you can’t see it from here doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

He shrugged. It didn't affect him either way. Carriage Town was warm enough, though they sometimes needed a space heater. Why mess with anything more than that?

She seemed upset with him when she locked him up that day. She seemed to want to cry. But she still kissed him on the forehead before closing the door—she would never forget that.

She came back late, and with three grocery bags full of light bulbs. She said through the door that they were bright like the sun, and so she replaced every bulb in the house that wasn't in Michael's bedroom before letting him out. He was impatient. And he was confused when she told him he'd only get to come out if he turned off his bedroom light first, which he did.

She turned on every light; it was too bright for her to be able to open her eyes to more than a slit.

When she opened his door, Michael screamed and covered his eyes and dove to the floor, covering his head.

"Open," said Joanna, "Open. It's like the sun." And she reached down and tickled him until he was laughing so hard he could hardly breathe and couldn't help but push her away, smiling all the while, and when he loosened up she rolled him onto his back and he covered his eyes with his arms, but didn't curl up again. Joanna was sitting cross-legged next to him, absently running the fingers of her good hand through his hair, and Michael was smiling wider than she'd ever seen, still covering his eyes. His mother said, "Do you feel it? Is it warm enough?"

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

This novel is an experiment.

It's difficult for me to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of this project because part of the project is to consciously turn what are traditionally perceived as weaknesses in a narrative into strengths. Which is why what follows will err on the side of self-criticism: I am contemplating whether these attempts are successful.

I have never attempted to build an entire world before. The closest my work has previously come to this kind of scale is in presenting the world as it's known as off, or slant. But I was compelled, in this case: I simply couldn't think of any other way to write a story in my hometown of Flint, Michigan while keeping it fresh. Which isn't to say that this novel is autobiographical—it's not—but rather that every time I tried to start writing the story, I ended up seeing everything in the context of Flint. This was not by design at first, though after so many false starts, based mainly around trying to *avoid* this tendency, I decided to embrace it. So Carriage Town became an active caricature of Flint, Michigan, the problems of pollution and industry and poverty all blown up to absurd proportions. It's been my experience when attempting to write about Flint in the past that people think I'm erring too far on the side of the fantastic, the unbelievable, and so this feels like a natural step.

Which may be problematic: I want Carriage Town to be present but not overwhelming—and I realize that that seems strange given that the place is all-encompassing by its very nature—in the same way I wanted the characters to be present but not overwhelming. My fear is that I've missed the balance I sought, and that both the characters and the environment come across as flat. I started the project leaning towards a certain one-dimensionality in terms of objective

(finding home, a mother, a son), but I fear it's infected everything. That maybe, in pushing that stringent orientation toward *one thing*, the narrative's potential complexity—and that of the characters, setting, etc.—has suffered. In and of itself, I don't think that narrative simplicity is a bad thing—I'm thinking of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* and Brian Evenson's *Dark Property* as two books whose characters operate in pursuit of a singular goal, which creates a narrative simplicity that, it seems to me, is rare—but I'm not sure if it's working with this novel. A part of me feels as though the narrative should have more wrinkles, while another thinks that the focus is not singular enough. I don't think I've reached the balance this piece needs.

Part of this, I think, is because of the passivity of all the characters not named Jack and Lars: when they're assertive, it's an event. Michael and Joanna each have a singular drive, but their pursuit of it largely revolves around latching on to someone else and letting them do much of the legwork (this is more true for Michael than Joanna). Which I think is fine, save for the case of Liss, who, in terms of actual desire, is a cipher: she's very much along for the ride, but her goal is stated through Jack. My thinking here is that she's had enough of making decision, which wouldn't be problematic on its own, but maybe is because of the passivity of most of the characters. I'm not yet convinced that this is bad decision per se, but it is a decision I've been questioning throughout the writing process, and one that I'm still questioning. The locus of this question is the same as that stated earlier: I worry that Liss is too one-dimensional.

(I distantly recall reading a novel entitled *The Hidden Hand; or, Capitola the Madcap*, by Eden Southworth, wherein most if not all of the characters are stereotypes, which forces this kind of one-dimensionality onto everything. I think *The Long Road Home* is doing the same thing, but without the cultural weight of stereotypes.)

The limits of the characters' desires are one of the reasons I felt a need to pepper the narrative with an omniscient voice: it's a counter-balance; the other reason is that, given my concerns with the world-building of this project, I felt that the world needed to be contextualized. Which is to say that the omniscient voice, in my thinking, provides a foundation for the very idea of the city of Carriage Town. I also think it works as a tether for the disparate elements of the story—without it, I don't think it comes together. That it works this way (in my mind, anyway) might just be a weakness of the writing, and I will admit that I didn't conceptualize the purpose of the omniscient voice until well after the first draft was completed—but I think that the idea is compelling. This is why I decided, toward the end, to make the entire narrative the collective voices of Michael and Lars, telling the story and filling in the blanks as they see them. This perhaps isn't borne out as far as it should be, but I like having narrative authority cast into doubt. On the one hand, why would they lie, their objectives being so simple? On the other, why not? The weakness with introducing this question is that there's not a whole lot of motive either way; the strength of it is that it forces the reader to try and fill in the blanks in the same way as Michael and Lars.

The vacillation in my thinking with all of these questions has its roots in expectations and in tendencies: it is my tendency as well as an expectation for the elements of a narrative to be more complex, while it's a stated goal in this project to try to simplify it all, and to tell a satisfying story. This attempt at simplification feels unnatural to me, which made *The Long Road Home* a very, very difficult project.

Does attempting to run afoul of these tendencies and expectations constitute an experiment? Isn't that the definition of literary experimentation?

My characters have always operated under obsessions. It's where I seem to start with most of my work: what is the major obsession in play? This project feels very much like a simplification of that, like an obsession distilled.

A final note, to address the violence in this story. It's pervasiveness is meant to parallel the fact that there is very little redemption in the story as a whole. The happiest moments are memories, and the massive uptick in violence as the story moves forward is meant to reflect that. I meant for this to have a happy ending, and I think it does that. The direct parallel between Joanna's scorched, mutilated body and her attempt to emulate the sun for Michael is intended to drive home the idea that the very worst incidents can harken to the very best memories.

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